

**Kieli, Vol. 2:
White Wake on
the Sand**

Kabei, Yukako

VISIT...

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Volume: 2



KIELI

Yukako Habet



Yukako Kabei

Illustrated by: Shunsuke Tane

KIELI

WHITE WAKE ON THE SAND

Becca, how are you doing?

"Kids! you don't ask a dead person how they're doing!"

"Oh, oh yeah..."

Becca: I'm doing well.

"Look, you. Isn't that a little too abrupt for a letter?"

"Oh, what's the problem? Keep writing, or we'll be here all year."

The Corporal is making a lot of noise beside me, so I'll just keep going. A lot has happened since we said goodbye in Easterbury. I met a lot of people. The conductor's ghost, who told me about an accident; the ghost clown that I met at a carnival and his balloon animals; and the old man at the clinic who kept waiting for Harvey to come back even after he died.

"What about me?"

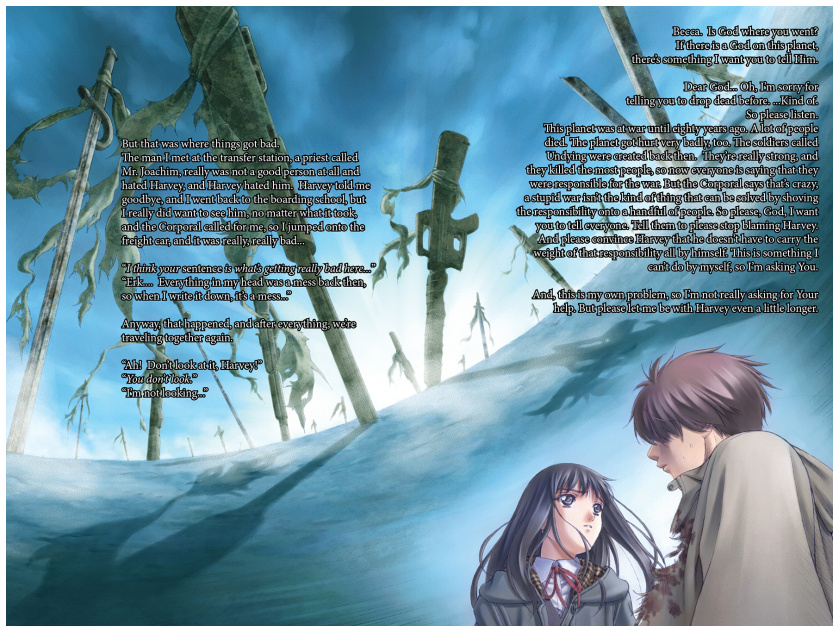
"I was just about to write that."

And the ghost possessing the radio, the Corporal—but you met him, too, right, Becca? He's Harvey's traveling companion, he's short-tempered and has a bad mouth and likes music (he calls it "rock"). A lot happened between Harvey and the Corporal in the past. Harvey may not look like it, but he can have a surprising amount of integrity. I think he still feels a little like he owes the Corporal, but now they're getting along really well. The Corporal never does anything but complain, but the truth is, he does like Harvey.

"We're not getting along, and I don't like him. ~~From that,~~
"You tell me to write, then you tell me to cross."

But when we got to our destination, the ruins of the battlefield of the abandoned mine, there was no sign of the Corporal. There were grave markers for countless people who died there during the War, and the Corporal's grave was there, too.

That was where we went our separate ways, even though we'd only been together for a short time. The Corporal went back to his grave. I went back to boarding school, and I think Harvey was probably planning to go off to wherever it came again...



Been. Is God where you went?
If there's a God on this planet,
there's something I want you to tell Him.

Dear God... Oh, I'm sorry for
telling you to drop dead before... Kind of.
So please listen.

This planet was at war until eighty years ago. A lot of people
died. The planet got into very bad shape. The cities called
the things were created had broken. They're really strong, and
they killed the most people, so now everyone is saying that they
were responsible for the war. But the Corporal says that's crazy,
a stupid war isn't the kind of thing that can be solved by showing
the responsibility onto a handful of people. So please, God, I want
you to tell everyone. Tell them to please stop blaming Harvey.
And please convince Harvey that he doesn't have to carry the
weight of that responsibility all by himself. This is something I
can't do by myself, so I'm asking You.

And, this is my own problem, so I'm not really asking for Your
help. But please let me be with Harvey even a little longer.

But that was where things got bad.
The man I met at the transfer station, a priest called
Mr. Joachim, really was not a good person at all and
hated Harvey, and Harvey hated him. Harvey told me
goodbye, and I went back to the boarding school, but
I really did want to see him, no matter what it took,
and the Corporal called for me, so I jumped onto the
freight car, and it was really, really bad...

"I didn't your sentence to what's getting really bad here."
"Eek... Everything in my head was a mess back then,
so when I wrote it down, it's a mess."

Anyway that happened, and after everything, we're
traveling together again.

"Huh? Don't look at it, Harvey?"
"You don't look at it."
"I'm not looking."

"Kieli, you can see the ocean."

"...She's asleep."

"She's tired. It's been a long trip."

"Where is she gonna send that letter?"

"She's got nowhere to send it."

"Why did she write such a pointless letter?"

"Everybody has someone they want to write a letter to, even if they're not gonna send it."

"I don't."

"That's nothing to be proud of."

"Herbie."

"Harvey."

"Are you enjoying this?"

"What is this all of a sudden...? I don't enjoy talking to you."

"I'm serious. Do you wish you'd stayed dead at the abandoned mine, or are you glad that you're alive right now?"

"...I'm grateful. To you, and to Kieli."





“SAY HELLO TO MY DOLL.”

CHAPTER 1:
GIMMICK DOLL, GIMMICK HEART

CHAPTER 2:
A HAND TO PROTECT YOU

CHAPTER 3:
COME DOWN THE STAIRS
TO WHERE I AM

CHAPTER 4:
FALL DOWN THE STAIRS
TO WHERE I AM

CHAPTER 5:
TORI PERI

CHAPTER 6:
WHITE WAKE ON THE SAND

“SAY SO LONG TO MY DOLL.”

KIELI

White Wake on the Sand

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

Copyright

Kieli: White Wake on the Sand
YUKAKO KABEI

Translation by Alethea Nibley and Athena Nibley

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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“SAY HELLO TO MY DOLL.”

The doll didn't look particularly valuable, but it had a lovely face.

Chestnut curls, blue glass eyes, blushing cheeks. The legs that extended from under her dark green apron dress *swung back and forth*, as if she was bored, and although she had no one to talk to, her high-pitched soprano voice *chattered incessantly* in a subdued whisper.

As she listened attentively, the doll's adorable lips, still smiling, spat in an adorably high voice, one hateful complaint after another, like, "That damn third-rate doll maker, I *told* him to make my eyes out of jade, but he used these cheap glass balls. He can go to hell ten million times," or, "How dare that black bear grab my leg and swing me around. He deserved what he got, being taken off by the garbage collectors."

The girl froze automatically, gaping at the doll. The string of abusive language ceased abruptly, and a strange silence settled over them.

A girl's face rose palely from the darkness, creaking as it turned ninety degrees toward her. The glass eyes didn't blink, fixed in an eerie state; only her red lips moved, demanding suddenly, "Hello! Stop eavesdropping, and let's play!"

"I"

The girl drew back in surprise, and her back crashed into someone sleeping beside her. "Hm...? What's wrong?" came a woman's sleepy voice.

That instant, the doll froze, regarding her with a chilling smile plastered to her innocent face.

"My doll! She was talking...!" she appealed in a lisp, but the person next to her just sighed in exasperation. "Oh, is that all?" But the woman didn't say it mockingly or as if politely consoling her after a bad dream; she said it quite plainly, as if such a thing was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Even dolls talk sometimes, when they're bored. You'd be bored, too, if you had to sit quietly wearing the same outfit all the time," she said, smiling kindly, and readjusted the blanket. The girl wasn't at all satisfied with this explanation, but when soft, white fingers brushed the hair off of her forehead, she felt better somehow, and a talking doll started to seem as if it wasn't such a

big deal after all.

When she closed her eyes, she could feel the gentle vibrations of the ship and the low sound of its engine. She felt as if she was in a cradle as she gave herself over to the comforting rocking and finally fell asleep...

“Kieli. We’re getting off.”

A voice rained down on her head, pulling Kieli out of her light doze, and she opened her eyes.

...A *dream*, she thought vaguely as she turned her groggy gaze to her right and left. Who was that person? She got the feeling that maybe she remembered the feel of those soft hands and that slightly husky voice...

“Ah!”

Once Kieli realized that the other passengers on the train were starting to get up noisily from their seats, she was suddenly wide awake. Before she knew it, the scene outside the window had changed from the endless, monotonous wilderness that had lulled her to sleep on her long journey to the bustle of a station platform.

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“We’re here? You’re kidding.”

“I’m not,” her traveling companion answered shortly, standing on the other side of the box of seats and reaching up to the rack to get their luggage.

“But you promised you’d tell me when we could see the ocean!”

“I told you. It’s *your* fault you didn’t wake up.”

“Really? How many times?”

“Once,” her companion answered immediately and unapologetically. He was tall enough that he didn’t need to stretch to pull their bags off the rack. He easily freed Kieli’s bag and handed it to her. He caught her glare as she puffed her cheeks out in disappointment and winced. “You’re mad about that? You don’t have to be in such a hurry; once we’re on the boat, you’ll see so much of the same thing every day you’ll start to hate it,” he said curtly, then hung his own backpack from his left shoulder and walked down the aisle.

“Ugh...”

Kieli glared loathingly at his back for a while, but, seeing him favor his right side as he walked with some difficulty, she thought better of it and hurried out of her seat, carrying her bag and down

coat. As she began to leave, she turned around and grabbed the cord of the small radio left on the windowsill, then ran down the aisle after the copper-colored head sticking out above the crowd.

She was sad that she didn't get to see the ocean from the train, but when she thought about getting on the boat soon, her step naturally lightened, and she practically bounded down the steps onto the platform. The shoulder bag she wore bounced loudly against her hips.

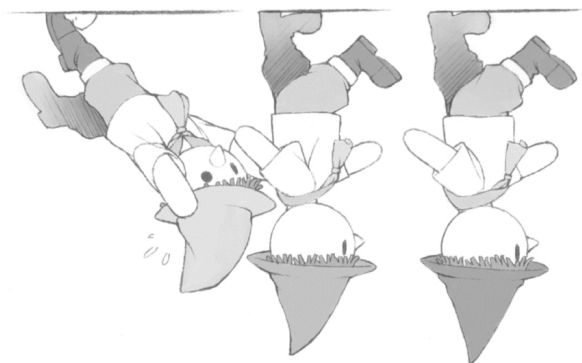
"We're here! We're at the station!"

When she stretched and took a deep breath, a scent of dry wind from the harbor, mixed with the pleasant outdoor air, tickled the inside of her nose.

They were at the last station on the far east of the continental railroad that ran across the wilderness. Beyond here spread the Sand Ocean—a vast sea of flowing sand said to cover sixty percent of the planet's surface.

CHAPTER 1

GIMMICK DOLL, GIMMICK HEART



What do normal people think of when asked to list what a person needs to live? Air. Water. Food. And if they want to live a fairly civilized life, clothes and a place to live.

Conceivably, there are some who might say love.

Beyond that, “Money,” her traveling companion declared, extremely frankly, without any hesitation, nuance, or optimism.

And, well, he was exactly right. People like them, who wandered everywhere and never stayed in one place, had a lot of things like travel expenses and lodging expenses that required money, and in most cases, they needed to do something to get that money to pay those expenses wherever they went.

“Are we gonna get part-time jobs?” Kieli asked, half hoping because she would have liked to try it, but he flatly rejected the idea, asking who would do something that was such a waste of effort.

To him, the way to attain funds seemed not to be anything as admirable as earning it for steady labor (although if you asked him, his method was a fine, steady one), but to “get what you need in a night and get the hell out of there so as not to have any future trouble.”

And so Kieli and her companion were, at the moment, on the outskirts of the warehouse district a little ways from the harbor, at a not particularly classy shop in a not particularly classy alley, doing not particularly classy things. The entrance was run-down—it didn’t even have a sign—and yet when they went down the dark, narrow stairway to the basement, there was a surprising number of customers; there were a few men surrounding each table under the dim lights, and noise, tobacco smoke, and the scent of alcohol filled the hall—that’s the kind of place it was.

“Ah!” Kieli couldn’t help making a little sound as she gazed meekly at the five cards in her hands, and her expression brightened.

She held all five of the cards unified by their dark green trade color and the mark representing the “free city” suit. The designs drawn on them were the “judge,” “sword,” “revolution,” “bishop’s staff,” and “shepherd.” She knew from watching several times that this was apparently a very strong hand.

“...Look, Kieli,” a low voice addressed her. She turned to Harvey, who was sitting beside her, glaring down at the table with his eyes half-closed, a vein throbbing in his temple.

She gasped and looked around at the other men surrounding the table.

One of the men stared firmly at her. He said, “I fold,” and threw his cards down on the table. The other two followed his example and announced their forfeit of the game. Harvey swore quietly enough that only Kieli could hear him, took Kieli’s cards out of her hands, and tossed them carelessly on the table.

When she looked at all the other cards on the table, she saw that someone had collected five silver “federation army” cards, but of all the hands, her five cards were overwhelmingly the strongest.

“That’s some partner you got there, One-Arm,” a man laughed sarcastically. He got up from his seat and started collecting the cards. (The person in charge of distributing cards was called the “dealer,” and they took turns playing him by rotation.) “Yeah, well,” Harvey returned ironically and none too kindly, pulling the small bills that had been left on the table toward him with his left hand, not very happy.

“Sorry...,” she whispered apologetically and glanced sideways at him, but Harvey wasn’t even looking at her; he breathed out a puff of tobacco smoke with a short sigh. She ducked her head in shame. It was most basic of the basics in this game not to let it show on your face how good or bad your hand was. Apparently it was called a poker face, after the game this one was based on.

“One-Arm” was the name the players at the table called Harvey, for convenience, and Kieli was either “Tiny” or “Little Girl.” The other three at the table were “Whiskers,” “Tattoo,” and “Glasses,” after their most easily distinguishable features, so there was no room for confusion; almost everyone in the place, including them, were sailors on a sand ship anchored at the port. Of course Kieli was small, but in the midst of all these sailors whose only redeeming quality might have been their thick, well-built frames, even Harvey seemed delicate, and although there was no malice in their dubbing him One-Arm, there was a feeling in the air that they were sneering at the “little boy,” looking down on him.

As she picked up the cards that had been dealt her, Kieli threw a glance to her left at Harvey’s right side. The empty right sleeve dangling from his half-coat was shoved artlessly into his pocket at

the wrist. Acting as aide to Harvey, who could use only one of his arms, Kieli was in charge of sitting next to him and holding his cards. (Incidentally, Harvey had a habit of playing with his lighter in his left hand under the table if he had bad cards, but the action was only visible from Kieli's angle, so the other players probably didn't suspect.)

Harvey looked over her head at his cards; he used the same fingers that held his cigarette to take two and discard them on the table. The dealer passed him two more cards, and Kieli picked them up and held them at an angle so only they could see.

He had two "swords" with different marks, and two "weapons dealers." *Two pairs. Not bad, but not so good, either*, Kieli thought, feeling like she understood.

There were five different suits: "federation army," "liberation army," "free city," "temple," and "nomads." There were thirteen picture cards for each mark, for a total of sixty-five cards in a deck. Each player received five cards, and the winner was determined by the strength of the marks and pictures in each hand—that was the general idea. The rules as to which cards made up a strong hand were pretty complicated and mysterious and impossible to commit to memory in a day. By itself, the "shepherd" was the weakest card, but it was also one of the five cards that made up the strongest hand.

She'd heard that the Sand Ocean sailors were descended from the crew of the spaceship that brought the settlers here in the colonization era. So the card game the sand sailors inherited was originally a game that the astronauts played to kill time during long voyages through vast space.

She didn't know if they were left over from that time, but some of the cards' names were peculiar nouns that Kieli had never heard before. She could kind of imagine the "liberation army" with its blue trade color, but she didn't know the silver "federation army," and the most incomprehensible of them all was the type of picture card called "Moon and Planet Earth."

Of course she knew "moon." Layers of thin sand clouds covered the sky on this planet, so she could only vaguely make out its shape on days with good weather, but the word referred to the two satellites that circled the planet. But she had never heard of "Planet Earth," and she thought it was weird that the picture on the card only had one moon.

“Kieli, hey...” Harvey called her for the umpteenth time that day, using the same tone of voice, somewhere between anger and resignation. When she snapped to attention, the eyes of all the other players had concentrated on her. She’d meant to really work to maintain her poker face this time, but before she knew it, “Not bad, but not so good, either,” was ingrained in her expression.

No one folded, but instead the players took turns tossing crumpled bills to the center of the table.

“I fold,” Harvey muttered—this time, he was the one to give up. For a while now, either he would fold immediately and lose a few coins, or everyone else would fold immediately and he would gain a few coins. Even Kieli, the amateur, got the feeling that this was not a very exciting game.

The other three finished the hand, and the man with the whiskers, who had four “cruiser” cards, whistled and said, “Thank you very much” as he gathered the bills. The losers groaned and slid their cards back to the dealer, who gathered the cards and started to redistribute them. Kieli had gotten pretty much used to it, so she didn’t hesitate to reach for the cards that slid in her direction, but was told, “That’s enough from you. You’re in the way. Go back to the hotel.”

The words flew at her with a smooth, casual air, but their contents were ruthless and pushed her away; without thinking, she stopped her hand.

“Oh? What? There’s no need for that.”

“Poor thing. We don’t mind a bit that she’s here.”

“Yeah, yeah. The fun’s just getting started.”

As the other players all joked, Harvey kept his head down, raised only his eyes, and muttered quietly, but with enough menace to freeze the air around them, “You got a problem?”

His tone made even Kieli shudder for a second, and the unexpected intensity of the one-armed “little boy,” who no one would believe was stronger than the sailors by any stretch of the imagination, seemed to overpower them. Their faces froze, their smirks still in place.

“Kieli,” he urged her.

Kieli stiffened with everyone else, but at his urging, she kicked her seat and stood up out of reflex. She glanced at Harvey to gauge his mood, but all she could discern was that he wasn’t leaving any room for her to voice an opinion. She gave a reluctant, “...

Oookaaaay,” and left the table.

“No detours,” Harvey’s voice called after her, but, displaying what little rebellion she could, she ignored it and ran for the exit.

She almost crashed headlong into a waitress who was busily carrying beer mugs around. Kieli was shocked by her provocative costume with its scant fabric. Kieli lost her balance when she dodged, hitting the back of another customer as she trotted out of the tumultuous hall and ran up the gloomy stairway.

Emerging above ground after climbing the stairs in a single bound, she turned around; the dim light that rose in a square from the hall at the bottom of the stairs somehow seemed like the entrance to another world. The clamor and stuffy air that reeked of tobacco smoke and alcohol had mysteriously vanished as she went up the stairs and didn’t reach her outside.

There was no sign of anyone else out in the warehouse district’s dark streets, but she could hear the murmur from the bustling main street one block over. Gift shops selling goods imported from the continent across the ocean and pubs that served travelers and sailors lined the port city’s main street, and apparently it was busy late into the night.

“He didn’t have to chase me out. Right, Corporal?” Kieli grumbled aloud and looked down, hoping for a response from her usual conversation partner, but the radio that normally hung from her neck wasn’t there. She realized she’d forgotten it in the gambling house and turned back toward the stairway.

But she hated to have to go back and get it, so, “...Oh well. Guess I’ll go to the hotel.” Inwardly, she stuck her tongue out at Harvey at the bottom of the stairs and turned on her heel. They’d reserved a room at a hotel (or rather a cheap, tiny inn run by a man with a bad leg and his ill-tempered wife) on the main street.

She started walking that way but changed her mind and stopped.

Without the Corporal, I’d just be bored if I went back...

Harvey told her not to take any detours, but wandering a bit should be fine, as long as she got back before him. Maybe she’d go see the night market, or...

“The harbor...,” she muttered to no one in particular and set her sights in the direction opposite the main street.

The square roofs of a cluster of warehouses stood like black shadows against the night sky. The scent of sand drifted faintly

from behind them.

Kieli scrambled up to the top of the pile of four-legged tetrapods on the shore and took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the sea breeze.

The ocean that spread before her eyes seeped blackly into the night sky, becoming one with it, and was not the majestic view she'd expected. But the quiet sound of sand lapped ceaselessly in her ears, rhythmically growing louder and softer at low intervals, and she could sense part of the ocean of flowing sand extending all the way to the horizon.

A gentle breeze brushed against her cheeks and hair, carrying particles of sand. To the people who lived in the area, the dry wind didn't really bring any blessings in with it, just exposed the land and buildings to sand and eroded them, but compared to the inland's harsh winter winds, even its chill felt gentle, and it was perfectly refreshing and pleasant. She'd left her down coat at the inn, but her sweatshirt and shorts were enough.

The Sand Ocean that consumed sixty percent of the planet's surface was, as the name suggested, an ocean made of sand. Extremely fine, light sand rode the tides and created waves, called flowing sand, that circled the entire planet, never staying in one place. The two moons that crossed paths as they revolved around the planet produced a complex, twisted gravitational pull, and its effect formed the strong tides—but she had only memorized that information for last year's geography winter final.

School, huh...

Now that she thought of it, it would be about time for winter finals at the boarding school in Easterbury. Miss Hanni, her classmates, her room at the boarding school, and the face of her departed roommate flashed through her mind. Becca always got bored when Kieli was busy studying for tests and would talk to her and be even more annoying than usual; Kieli'd found that irksome, hadn't she?

It hadn't even been a full winter since her days at the boarding school, but it already seemed like such a long time ago. She'd gotten so used to her short hair and boyish appearance that it felt like she'd had them for years.

"Oof..."

Balancing on one leg (not that she would have hated the idea,

but she would never have done this back when she only wore skirts), she turned around clockwise, taking in the scenery.

Facing the ocean, on her right, a line of concrete sand-proof embankments continued in a gentle arc along the coast, disappearing into the darkness a little ways away. When she turned her back to the sea and faced the opposite direction, the lights from the main street flickered in the distance; she wouldn't go so far as to call them dreamlike, but they gave the impression of an elegant night city.

Facing the ocean again, she saw the harbor along the coast to her left. Lights glowed here and there; maybe people were getting ready for the next morning's departures. She could vaguely make out the outlines of white piers and black boats against the dark gray night sky.

She'd be boarding a ship there the following day. If they missed the boat tomorrow, they'd have to wait a week for the next one.

Her heart beat excitedly when she thought about getting to ride on a ship, but for some reason a sinking feeling accompanied it, and she crouched down on the tetrapod and held her knees. As she rested her chin on her knees and gazed at the lights from the harbor, she reasoned over one thing and then another in her mind.

She was the one who had insisted on tagging along to the gambling house even though Harvey had told her to wait at the hotel, but that was because she worried about Harvey, who was still having problems with his wounds, not yet healed. The reason she'd asked if she could hold the cards at the beginning of the second game was because after she'd watched the first game from the sidelines, it looked like it was hard playing with just his left hand...

...and Harvey never asked for help.

She realized again that Harvey didn't really need her; that, instead, the smallest things she did dragged him down; the thought made her uneasy. Right after they reunited at the Easterbury transfer station, she *had* lent him a hand a lot because he couldn't walk properly, but he might have allowed that only because she happened to be there to use as a crutch. They'd stopped at stations along the way to rest, and it took them half a month to get to the port town; by the time they did, he was limping a little, but his leg had gotten much better, and there was no longer any need for Kieli to help him out.

His right arm had been almost completely blown off, and of

course it looked as if that wouldn't regenerate so easily, but it didn't seem to bother him that much. He said, "Give it three, four years, and it'll be back to normal. It only took that long last time" (by which she figured he meant right after the end of the war eighty years ago), with a look on his face as if he was talking about next month. To Kieli's sense of time, though, three or four years wasn't so near in the future that she could afford to wait. After three or however many years, Harvey would still look about twenty like he did now, but Kieli would be seventeen in three years, and she couldn't imagine herself at seventeen.

In fact, now that she thought about it, they wouldn't necessarily be together in three years anyway. There wasn't even any guarantee that they'd be together for more than ten days.

It would take their ship ten days to reach the southeastern continent—she hadn't heard a word from Harvey about what he would do after that. In the worst-case scenario, it might be that the only thing in Harvey's head was his single-sentence promise to get her on a boat, and he didn't have any inclination to do anything with her beyond that. It was possible that once they reached the port on the other side, he would say, "Well, g'bye. I kept my promise..."

"...No more of this."

Feeling herself sinking into a bottomless pit of depression, Kieli forcibly cut off that line of thinking.

After all, even in that worst-case scenario, it meant that she'd definitely get to be with him for at least ten more days. It was better to think that way.

Just as she shook her head lightly back and forth and diverted her thought processes into a positive direction, ".....?"

Something moved at the edge of her vision. She twisted her head around and squinted past the sand-proof wall to see a small mountain of tetrapods catching the dull light from the pier, rising whitishly into view.

A small creature was struggling between the piled blocks. She could see two more of the same kind of creature moving around nearby.

What the...?

She ducked down and crawled across the blocks to sneak up close to them and saw that they were little people, about as tall as Kieli's knee.

People? No.

They were three tin dolls wearing matching sailor collars and triangular hats colored red, green, and yellow. Such collars were the trademark of seafaring men appearing in old stories of past times, so they must have been modeled after those sailors. Cone-shaped noses poked out of their perfectly round faces with small, perfectly round eyes half-hidden by their triangle hats.

The doll in the green hat was stuck between the tetrapod blocks. The doll in the red hat tried pulling on his arms and then pulling on his legs, and the one in the yellow hat just went back and forth in a panic, running around—oh! he fell.

“Are you okay?” Kieli couldn’t contain her laughter. She reached out a hand and helped the yellow doll up. The doll jumped up with a little yelp, perhaps startled, and very cautiously made an about-face to look behind him. The doll in the red hat who was pulling his stuck companion’s legs at a very reckless angle (he looked like he was winning a wrestling match) stopped immediately and looked in her direction.

Kieli went a little closer and offered her hand to the stuck doll in the green hat. The doll resisted and struggled for a second but soon settled down and relaxed his body so that Kieli could handle him more easily.

When she pulled him out from between the blocks, his torso scraped the concrete a little.

“I’m sorry. Did that hurt?”

The doll, having finally regained his freedom, alighted onto the wall with his tin shoes, looked at her, and shook his head furiously. The red-hat and the yellow-hat dolls ran to his left and right. They all stood up straight in a line and hit their right fists near their hearts and thrust them forward in an adorable sailor salute.

Then they all bowed quickly, made a ninety-degree right-face, and marched very precisely toward the town with the red-hat doll in the lead. In the rear, the yellow-hat doll moved his right arm and right leg in unison.

Ummm...

Kieli watched them march off, then stood there gaping for a little while. She helped them because they were there, but it didn’t occur to her until just now to wonder what in the world they were.

Well, even dolls must move and talk to kill time, but...

The thought came to her out of nowhere, and she got the

feeling that someone had said that to her before. Who was it? A long, long time ago...

As she wondered vaguely in the corner of her mind, she focused her gaze on the lights of the town where the dolls disappeared and thought, "I wonder where they're going."

Yeah, she nodded to herself, then jumped off the wall and started to run at full speed.



Assuming that everyone else had conspired to take away all the money he had on him, and assuming his social standing was such that he would prefer to avoid getting into a fight and causing a scene, and assuming that the game itself wasn't any damn fun anyway, Harvey figured it would be wise in such a situation not to say anything and to get the hell away from the table.

But by the time he realized that he'd been had, Harvey was in a position where he couldn't back down until he regained some of what he'd lost; that's how the world worked.

Argh, I've lost my touch...

Harvey cursed inwardly in annoyance. Not so much at the guys who had tricked him but at himself for taking so long to deal with them.

He thought that the reason he couldn't get into the swing of the game was that he hadn't played for so long that he couldn't get a feel for it, but somewhere along the way, he started to notice the other players' unusual bets. The fact that they weren't very high only made it harder to catch on. If they all thought that one of their pals had a stronger hand than he did, then they made a sign to each other and would all raise the stakes; if not, they all folded. Most likely, they needed only one of them to win, and they'd divide the winnings later.

Harvey reached out to pick up the cards he'd been dealt, but it really wasn't easy without a right hand, and it took him some time to confirm which five cards he held. It was true that he couldn't stand how Kieli reacted to every little thing as she sat next to him, but it was pretty helpful having her there.

A faint static emitted by the radio left in Kieli's seat needled

Harvey, as if lecturing him. He wondered what it was so mad about; then he guessed, accurately, *Oh, it must be because I was so hard on her when I chased her away.* But it wasn't that he cared one way or another about Kieli. He sent her back because, judging from the atmosphere, if things kept going the way they were, they would have suggested betting *her* instead of money, and if that happened, he wasn't confident that he could have settled it without a fight, or rather, he *wouldn't* settle it without one.

"Yo, One-Arm, what're you gonna do? Don't you think you'd better go on home before you lose any more, boy?" the man sitting diagonally across from him said, with an obvious sneer. He was a big man with a giant snake tattoo coiling around his upper arm, which was as thick as Harvey's thigh. He was called "Tattoo" accordingly.

"If I lose any more. Let's go one more hand." Harvey easily rose to the challenge (Tattoo smirked as if to say, "What an idiot") and cast a sideways glance at the radio next to him. It sputtered static grumpily, no doubt thinking something like, "Why don't you just give it up already, brainless; you're not gonna win anyway. You wanna go bankrupt?"

Oh, shut up. You can't complain if I win.

He furrowed his eyebrows stealthily and reached out to the radio. "Can I bet this?"

When he lifted the radio by its cord to show them, for a second a voice, "*Geh,*" slipped out of the speaker, then immediately blended into the static and vanished.

"Are you kidding? That piece of scrap?" Tattoo started to object.

"No, wait a minute," another man interjected, leaning over the table to take a long, hard look at the radio. This one had thick black whiskers covering his cheeks so was naturally called "Whiskers." "It's an antique radio from before the War. I saw one like it in a curio shop in South Hairo. Does it still work? Incredible, a collector would pay a mint."

"Then it's okay, right? If I lose, you can do whatever you want with it," Harvey declared, ignoring the homicidal mood he could sense from the radio. (He knew that it had some value as an antique, but to be honest, he didn't know it had *that much* value. Next time he was really hard up for cash, he would think about pawning it off.)

He was just getting back into the swing of the game; now he would be in trouble if he didn't seriously try to win something.

It didn't matter if the other guys were in cahoots or not. There wouldn't be a problem if he could get the money they wagered (rather, he would appreciate it if they raised the bets pretty high), so basically, he either had to get a winning hand or else get his opponents to fold.



“Wah, I'm sorry!” Kieli apologized hastily to the pair of passersby as she crashed into them, looking every which way as she ran, and brushed past. They were a sailor and a woman with thick makeup and a faux fur coat; the sailor watched curiously and the woman dubiously as she left them.

The pubs that served travelers and crews from anchored ships stood out in the port town at night, and beautifully dressed women stood here and there along the streets, alone or in pairs, and when they caught a man who looked like a sailor, they would call out to him. Kieli had a vague idea of what the women were doing. It wasn't as if there weren't any neighborhoods like this in Easterbury, where she grew up, and in a port town with lots of sailors who didn't get to see women very often in their daily lives, they were probably in higher demand.

She started to feel a bit anxious. This wasn't a place for someone like her to be walking around by herself at night. If the Corporal or Harvey found her, they'd probably yell at her.

Just as she began to think that maybe she ought to go back to the hotel, she caught sight of a triangular hat appearing and disappearing between the legs of someone in front of her. There were a lot of people around, and as long as no one was paying particular attention or looking down, they were hardly noticeable. It looked as if no one in the crowd had detected the small creatures weaving between their legs.

Found them!

Completely forgetting that she was *just* thinking about going back, Kieli sped up and pursued them.

“Huh...”

When she got to the spot she thought she'd seen the triangle hat, Kieli lost sight of it again and stood there bewildered. "Whoops, careful now." Someone ran into her from behind; she tottered and clung to a nearby light post.

A side road led away from the shadows of the streetlight. It was a narrow alley, sandwiched between pubs on either side; piles of garbage lay next to a door that seemed to lead to a kitchen, and a stagnant air settled along the ground, making it seem even narrower.

She could see the red, green, and yellow triangle hats marching along on the other side.

Wait! She inwardly called after them and went through the alley, stepping over the piles of trash. Halfway down the narrow passage, the streetlight hardly reached anymore, and the alley was pitch dark; she got discouraged and looked back to see a sliver of light glittering from the business district, but somehow as if from a distant world. Deciding there wasn't much difference between the danger of the business district at night and the danger of the other side of this alley, she aimed for the pale blue light that she saw at the alley's exit and set off at a trot.

She came out onto a street lined with old stores and small workshops.

Unlike the business district, where this was the time for earning money, almost all the shops on this street had already closed and turned off their lights. It was dark except for the pale blue streetlamps that flickered here and there. A few of the shops had papers plastered over their shutters as if they had shut down for good, and the torn papers sometimes fluttered in the wind. The sound was abnormally loud in the gloom and made Kieli jump.

She looked around in search of the dolls in the triangle hats and saw one shop with its lights still lit on the corner of the street. A yellow light leaked out, outlining the shop's door, and cast a dim glow on the asphalt.

There was a small display window next to the door; a mechanical model ship, a five-fingered mechanical arm—maybe a robot arm or a manipulator of some sort—with its cables and metal framework showing, and other such things lined up in disarray on the other side of the dusty, dirty glass. Apparently it was a machine shop or something.

As she stood in front of the store looking at the display window,

the door beside it opened with a rusty creak, as if inviting her inside. The light grew somewhat stronger, illuminating the street, and warm air flowed outside.

Kieli hesitated but sidled closer and peered inside the door.

“Um, hello...” she tried in a small voice, but apparently no one heard her as there came no answer.

It was a small shop. Metal parts of all shapes and sizes—Kieli had no idea what they would be used for or how (possibly most of them were junk)—filled the room in heaps, making the already small shop feel even more cramped.

Kieli spotted the triangle-hatted dolls sitting in a line on a shelf made of steel framework and cried out, “Ah!” But now they showed no sign of movement and sat quietly with their tin legs hanging from the edge of the shelf as if they had been left there all along.

There was a counter in the very back of the shop, and behind it appeared to be the workshop area. A bright fire burned in a wide-mouthed furnace. A man, probably the shop owner, sat in front of it wearing a fireproof smock, holding a piece of metal in the flames with a pair of tongs.

“Hello. Sorry for coming in without asking...”

Perhaps her words failed to reach his ears because he was so immersed in his work; the shopkeeper didn’t react to her voice but silently continued his chore.

She tried waiting a bit, but it looked as though he wasn’t going to notice her after all, leaving Kieli at a loss; she hadn’t thought about what she would do once she ferreted out the dolls’ destination when she set out, and it had gotten late. Kieli thought she really would go back to the hotel.

GIMMICK DOLL, GIMMICK HEART - 29

“Um, I’m going now. Sorry for bothering you,” she tried addressing the shopkeeper again, but, as expected, she got no response; when she spun on her heels and headed for the door, something suddenly occurred to her, and she stopped. She turned to the shopkeeper once more.

This man...

She brushed aside her initial assumption that the man sitting there was probably alive and looked again to see that the shopkeeper, giving undivided attention to his work, was not a *living* human being.

Harvey once told her that people possessing keen spiritual

senses like Kieli's sometimes picked up on strong thought waves from memories that imprinted themselves on objects and places, like projections. Was what she saw right now the memories of the shopkeeper himself from when he was still alive, or were they someone else's...?

Just then, she sensed something behind her. She spun around, and a tall shadow was standing so close she could touch it—how long had it been there? The instant Kieli raised her face to the figure, she practically leaped backward, crashing into the counter behind her.

It was a rusty metal doll, as tall as an adult male. It stood there, the metal framework of its robot arms, just like the one in the display window, hanging from its likewise exposed shoulder joints. In contrast to the bare metal skull on the left side of its face, the right side was halfheartedly covered in a skin-colored rubber. The difference was so bizarre, it was creepy.

Kieli was frozen in place and couldn't move. The doll's robotic hand reached out and unceremoniously grabbed her upper arm.

"No...!" She screamed and tried to shake it off, but the doll was strong and didn't even twitch. Robotic arms caught her up on both sides, and her feet hung in the air.

"No, let go! Harvey!"



"Man, that felt good; just remembering those guys' panicked faces, I could burst out laughing. You're better than you look, Herbie. I'm impressed."

"Harvey." When the exultant voice flew at him from the radio dangling in his only hand, Harvey was too exasperated to do anything but correct its pronunciation. For a guy who was so homicidal when Harvey was losing, the radio sure cheered up quick the minute he started winning; man, he couldn't tell if he was kissing up or just dumb—not that it mattered.

As soon as he earned enough for boat fare and living expenses for a while, Harvey completely pulled out of the game and put the gambling house behind him. Now he was walking back to the hotel. The business district was probably still bustling, but by this time,

the gift shops in the area were almost all closed. Except for the dull light and muffled noise that escaped pub windows here and there, a listless atmosphere filled the street, as if everyone was tired of partying.

"But your poker face really is something. You really had those guys going. You could have taken so much more from them. Stopping when things were just getting started? What a waste."

"I got what I needed; that's enough. If I make too much of a show of winning, they'll remember my face, and I don't want to do too much that people will remember."

As long as the Church was after him, he couldn't leave footprints doing things that were too noticeable, and if people remembered his face, it could get to be problematic the next time they met. Because, in any case, he didn't age. The Corporal should have known all that, so when he answered, he was inwardly annoyed. *You weren't even interested at first, said gambling was for good-for-nothings; don't tell me to keep going now, you fickle old man.*

"...You're surprisingly down-to-earth in your work," the radio muttered after a brief silence, using a meek tone as if he'd convinced himself of something. Harvey made a disgusted face from the bottom of his heart.

"Cut it out; don't sympathize with me like that."

"Is that why you're so cold to Kieli? Because you're thinking of that stuff?"

"Wha—?" The sudden turn in conversation took him by surprise. He stopped automatically and looked down at the radio. "What are you talking about? I'm not cold to her."

"Uh, yeah. You are."

It irked him to have the Corporal declare it so finally, but for some reason he couldn't argue and so fell silent. But he hated leaving it at that, so in retaliation, he swung his arm around and made as if to throw the radio; the ensuing scream satisfied him, and he stopped.

"Damn it, next time you try that, I'll hit you with a shockwave in your sleep!"

"Go ahead and try, if you have a chance." As he shrugged off the radio's subsequent complaints and started walking again, he vaguely thought that maybe there was a part of him that was a bit cold.

He couldn't get Kieli wrapped up in this manner of living her

whole life, and if someone was to tell him that, somewhere in his consciousness, he was taking precautions against *that time*, he wouldn't be able to deny it. But he wasn't pessimistic enough to constantly worry about something when he didn't know if it would happen years or decades from now, so he didn't think it showed in his attitude. Still, thinking about those problems was more trouble than it was worth, and a complaint came involuntarily to his lips: "...Argh, man, this is a pain."

"What's a pain is your damn complicated personality."

"Who asked you?" he responded with a sneer, and just as he considered really tossing the radio this time, he spotted the owner of their hotel starting to close the front entrance.

The owner noticed him, too, and turned around.

"Oh, I didn't think you two were coming back tonight. I was just about to close up," he said with a gentle smile, then moved to the side, limping somewhat, and motioned him inside. He was a middle-aged man with a relatively good physique. He had been a sailor when he was young, but he retired after getting caught in a screw propeller and losing his leg. It wasn't a story Harvey really cared to hear, but when the man saw that he didn't have a right arm, he must have felt an affinity for him and told him this in the lobby as they were about to leave earlier.

"Thanks," Harvey answered casually and started to pass through, but something the owner said suddenly hit him, and he stopped. You *two*?

"Don't tell me the girl who was with me hasn't come back yet?"

"She wasn't with you?" the owner asked in response, as if that was the natural assumption. "*Wha—?*" a voice came from the radio's speaker for a second, as if he accidentally started to say something, then disappeared immediately. "What is that idiot doing...?" Harvey sighed, finishing the sentence.

"I'm gonna go look for her. Would you mind leaving the door open for me?"

"No, I don't mind," the owner said, nodding pleasantly. However...

"I'm sorry, but we're closing now. We'd like to get some sleep ourselves, you know," came a woman's thorny voice from inside, and Harvey, who had turned around and was about to go out the entrance, stopped, agitated.

In contrast to the owner, who had a bad leg but a nice

personality, his wife was a middle-aged woman with a bad temper and a shrill voice. There were more than a few types of people that Harvey didn't get along with and would like to avoid as much as possible. This woman was definitely one of those types.

He sighed inwardly and answered, "Fine then, I'll go get our bags. Oh, and I'll make sure to pay for the night." In a single breath, he answered all the questions he was sure she would ask before she had the chance and straddled the entrance again so he could go back to their room for a minute. The owner watched apologetically as he went; it would seem his opinion didn't count for much. "Oh yeah. Hey," he addressed Harvey's back, apparently wanting to offer what help he could in sharing what he had just thought of.

"There's a machine parts shop on the edge of the industrial district; you should stop by there before your boat leaves tomorrow."

Harvey blinked, wondering at this sudden declaration, and turned around. The hotel owner lifted the pants on his bad leg slightly, revealing the metallic ankle of his artificial leg.

"The man there also makes artificial limbs. As you can see, they don't look like much, but he makes some pretty good ones. I think you might find one useful."

"...Huh. Thanks." His reaction was somehow lacking since he hadn't considered the possibility of artificial limbs, and he looked down at the right sleeve of his coat shoved into his pocket. Little things like opening the seal on his cigarettes or fastening the belt of his workpants had gotten to be quite a pain. His arm would probably grow back in three or four years, but it could be pretty convenient to have a replacement until then.

"What are you talking about? Wasn't someone saying the owner of that shop died all of six months ago?" the wife's voice interjected, and the conversation took a somehow brutal turn. When he looked up, his eyes collided with the clearly suspicious gaze of the wife in her nightclothes. It was no surprise that a respectable citizen would see a drifter with one arm who went out to gambling joints as shady; since he'd brought Kieli with him, she might think that he was a slave trader or something if he wasn't careful.

"But sometimes the light's on at the shop. And it's not just me; some other guys in the neighborhood have seen it too," objected the husband in an emphatic tone, refusing to concede the point.

Not to be outdone, the wife raised her shrill voice even higher. “And I heard it from the lady that lives next door to him. Are you sure you haven’t gone senile?”

“Who are *you* calling senile?”

“Uhh...” The atmosphere around the couple started to become threatening, so Harvey sighed and stealthily distanced himself, then left, escaping. *Give me a break.*

As he climbed the stairs to the guest rooms, the radio, which had been silent until now, opened his mouth suggestively. “*Herbie.*”

“I know. Let’s go check it out.” Listening to the couple’s conversation, he kind of got a hunch. A light turning on in the home of someone who’s supposed to be dead—he hoped she wasn’t poking her nose where it didn’t belong again.



She seemed to have poked her nose where it didn’t belong.

Kieli had been made to sit on the counter and was feeling extremely perplexed as her feet dangled aimlessly in the air.

She had screamed in fright earlier, but the doll only picked her up and put her on the counter. It was actually a little disappointing. It didn’t seem to want to do her any harm—rather, it appeared to think she was a customer.

The dolls with the triangle hats cheerfully presented her with a plate of cookies. The three of them all worked together carrying the big oval plate over their heads. Sometimes the yellow hat in the back lagged behind, and they staggered as they crossed the counter and put the plate down next to Kieli.

Then they lined up on the other side of the plate and looked up at her expectantly.

“...Thank you.”

Kieli gave a vague smile, picked up a cookie, and took a little nibble. It was soggy and not tasty at all.

It looked like this shop hadn’t had any customers in a long time. Though it wouldn’t be wrong to say of course it hadn’t—the owner was dead.

By the shelf along the wall, the big doll (it would probably be more accurate to call it a robot than a doll) was trying to brew

some coffee. Kieli could tell from her perch that the contents of the coffee jar had crystallized together. Even so, the robot hit the bottom of the jar with its metal palm and forced the round clump of powder into the cup.

In the work area, the phantom of the shopkeeper, as usual, toiled silently, holding metal in the fire and pounding it into shape. There really was an actual fire in the furnace, so she figured that the robot lit it. Why would it do that?

Even normal dolls can move and talk—but on this point, the robot's behavior was just too strange and started to seem a little creepy after all.

The robot poured hot water into the cup and brought it to her. Its hands looked human but moved with jerky, mechanical motions as the five-fingered robotic arm offered her the cup.

“Um, I’m sorry. I have to go back now,” Kieli said without accepting and jumped down off the counter.

That instant, the coffee cup fell to the floor with a crash, and she watched as the liquid inside splattered out. She winced in surprise, and the robot, whose hands were now free, easily picked Kieli up and placed her back on the counter.

Apparently it was not going to let her leave.

“Please? I’ll be in trouble...” At a loss, she tried pleading, but the robot would not respond; it only knelt down to the floor, its knees creaking, and started gathering the pieces of the cup.

Regarding this and considering a bit, Kieli inwardly gave the signal, “Ready, go...” and this time leapt with all her might from the counter, over the head of the robot, landing on its other side.

“I’m sorry!”

She kept going and ran straight for the door.

But in the blink of an eye, the robotic arm had her by her collar and was dragging her back. She twisted her neck and saw the rubber-covered right side and the exposed left side of its face making a warped expression and looking down at her. “Let go!” Kieli shuddered and struggled with her whole body to shake the arm off.

Her heel kicked something and went numb; instantly, she fell to the floor. Her heel had gone right into its exposed joint. One of the robot's knees collapsed, and it staggered diagonally and plunged into a mountain of iron material with an impressive crash.



That instant—

“Wah...” Kieli couldn’t help crying out, sitting on the floor as parts scattered across it.

The image of the shopkeeper sitting in front of the furnace wavered and disappeared, triggering the transformation of the entire scene before her.

With no customers coming in, the various articles lined up on the shelves had gathered dust; as she watched, the floor and the walls got dirty, and the entire shop fell into complete disrepair. Only the furnace, with its bright, white flame still burning, appeared to float strangely in the desolate scene; the emotions emanating from it were loneliness, sadness, and something like confusion.

Did they belong to the robot and the dolls with the triangle hats...?

Kieli glanced at the robot with mixed feelings. Its motor gave a weak sound as the robot flailed its limbs, struggling to extract itself from the pile of fallen scrap metal. The dolls with the triangle hats jumped off the counter and ran tottering to it.

“Kieli.” A low voice fell down from over her head, and she looked up to see a tall, familiar figure standing behind her. He took in the scene of the shop with a strange, indifferent expression, yet she sensed a faint compassion intermingled with it. Then he bent his knees and knelt over her, covering her head.

“I *told* you to go straight back.”

Kieli hesitated a little, then offered her own right hand. The instant her fingertips touched it, there was a short whirl of a motor, and the arm made a fist as if surprised; Kieli followed suit and pulled her hand back. “S not gonna bite you.” Harvey laughed lightly, exasperated. She didn’t know which of them he said it to; he could have been saying it to both of them.

She reached out one more time, slowly, so as not to startle it. “It’s okay...,” she whispered quietly, and the arm opened its hand in understanding and timidly, softly took her palm.

“But you said I was in the way!”

“Did I say anything like that?”

“*Yeah. You did,*” a staticky, exasperated voice interjected. Harvey blinked and looked down at the radio hanging from his left

hand. Then he threw his gaze to the side as if thinking things over. "Oh, maybe I did. I didn't really mean anything by it," he muttered in a matter-of-fact way that could definitely be described as too insensitive.

"Meanie! I was thinking all kinds of things..." Kieli complained, reasonably angry. When she did, the sight of Harvey in front of her suddenly jolted to the side, leaving an afterimage.

She turned her head in shock to see that the robot's arm had grabbed the shoulder of Harvey's clothes and flung him to the side.

"Ack! Why, you—" Harvey twisted around and tried to take the defensive, but he must have tried to throw out the arm he didn't have. He failed and plunged into the pile of junk parts, right shoulder first. Metallic crashes reverberated noisily against the walls and ceiling of the tiny shop. "*Hold me properly, moron!*" the radio jeered as it slipped out of his hand and flew to a corner of the shop.

"Harvey, Corporal!"

Kieli tried to run toward them, but the robot grabbed her arm and pulled her back. Even the dolls in the triangle hats clung to her shoes in a three-doll heap and tried to restrain her.

"Let go! Why me!?"

She didn't know why they were so persistent with her, but it looked as if they weren't going to let her go, no matter what happened. She pushed the robot with her free hand, but it didn't budge, so, "Out of my way!" Kieli resisted with her entire body, leaving everything to the force of her weight and momentum as she shoved the robot away.

The robot lost its balance and staggered, about to fall over, then collapsed in a heap in the work area in the back.

"Kieli!" she heard Harvey's voice somewhere, beneath the "whoosh" created by wind stirring up the fire. Over the robot's shoulder, she could see the approaching mouth of the furnace with its white flames. The robot plunged backward into the furnace; Kieli closed her eyes automatically and a hot blast hit her face.

Immediately, the sound of wind and fire, along with the roar of something crumbling, assaulted her ears from all directions, and she could no longer tell what was what.

"...li!"

She didn't know if she'd been out for a few seconds or a few

minutes, but it probably wasn't very long. She regained her senses when someone called her name. Her sense of hearing returned to normal, and she could make out the noise of open flames and the periodic sound of something small crumbling somewhere very close by. Air so hot it hurt surrounded her.

"Kieli! Hey, answer me!" Harvey's voice reached her from behind something. It was a very panicked tone, one she didn't normally hear, and after wondering as to its cause and thinking of how unusual it was, her thoughts finally arrived at her own situation.

Black smoke and fallen pieces of iron dimmed her vision, but she perceived a faint red in places that were enveloped by flames. She had curled up and fallen over sideways; the spot just around her and the triangle hats at her feet was the only place that avoided the falling rubble, as if a hole had opened up.

She moved her head a little to look. The robot was on all fours, shielding the area above her head.

The rubber that covered the right side of its face had melted off, and the metal cranium had started to melt as well and begun to cave in. It looked even more distorted and ghastly than before, but Kieli couldn't take her eyes off of it and stared up into the eyes of the robot, who seemed to want to say something to her even though it was an artificial creation.

"What do you want to tell me...?"

The robot didn't answer Kieli's question, only protected her, standing over her like an unmoving, four-legged iron tower.

"Kieli! Answer me, I'm begging you..." Harvey's voice reached her from the outside for a third time; Kieli gasped and turned her head in his direction.

"Harvey, I'm here! I'm okay...", she yelled partway, but as soon as she inhaled, smoke filled her throat, making her cough violently.

Meanwhile, she heard the sounds of rubble being moved away from the other side, and a dull light shone through to her. The light was behind Harvey's face as he peered in at her, and though she saw it for only a second, his face bore an expression that was difficult to describe, something she had never seen before. If she had to put it in words, it was as if he was about to cry.

He reached his hand out to her, and she clung to it; he grabbed her hand tightly in return and pulled her out.

She kept going and fell into his chest, then lost all her energy

and collapsed, inhaling deeply to let some breathable air into her lungs. “Are you hurt?” She heard the short question from above and responded by shaking her head. Harvey rested his chin on the crown of her head and took a very long, very deep breath. Kieli couldn’t move her head for a while; she turned her eyes upward and gazed at his collarbone.

Then she gasped and turned back to the mountain of rubble, which was still bursting with flames. The piles of scrap metal around the furnace collapsed as the blaze engulfed them; it was starting to spread to the walls and ceiling. They didn’t look like they would last long.

“I’m fine; hurry. This way.”

She looked back through the gap in the rubble that she had crawled through. The robot was still planted there in the same pose as before. The fire wrapped around its metal frame and was starting to dye it red. “Hurry! Come out, hurry! You’ll melt!”

The robot raised its face slightly. It looked around with its naked eyeball. When it found the triangle hats fallen at its feet, it reached out one of its robotic arms and picked one of them up. It put the limp doll on the palm of its hand and held it out to her, as if entrusting it to her care when...

Maybe it couldn’t support the weight of the rubble anymore—the arm it was supporting itself on crumpled at the elbow.

“Ah!” As a reflex, Kieli leaned forward to take the doll, but heard, “Get back, stupid!” Right before her fingertips touched the tip of the triangle hat, she was grabbed from behind and dragged backwards.

Fwoom...!

A whirl of flame spun up behind the robot with the sound of an explosion. Hot wind blasted her face and mussed her hair, but Kieli forgot to turn away and stared in wide-eyed amazement, clinging to the arm that Harvey wrapped around her torso.

Before her eyes, flames swallowed up the robotic arm reaching for her along with the small face peering out from under the triangle hat. Perhaps her sense of hearing had gone numb—nothing from that moment entered her ears, as if all sound had vanished from the world.

Beyond the collapsing rubble, enveloped in fire and smoke, the dolls quietly disappeared.



Fhoooo...

She heard the long, low sound of the steam whistle riding on the sandy wind.

As the dark blue-gray night sky changed to the pale, sandy color of morning, Kieli walked over the smoky ruins of the fire.

The soles of her shoes trod rubble that still smoldered in places.

The reserved voices, mixed half with relief and half with fatigue, of people who were cleaning up after putting out the fire, reached her like white noise. The residents of the industrial district noticed and came running right away, so only the part of the shop with the furnace at its center burned down before they extinguished the blaze; the whole of the building was only half-burnt, and the conflagration didn't spread to its neighbors. But as the owner of the house was deceased, they would probably just demolish it.

The tip of her shoe tapped against something. She lowered her gaze and could barely see the tip of a yellow triangle hat peering out of the rubble. She bent down, moved the debris out of the way, and carefully picked up the doll's torso.

Its scorched head broke off at the neck and rolled onto the ground.

“.....”

Kieli pursed her lips and, for a while, looked mutely at the small body still in her hand. Its arms only dangled listlessly from the sleeves under its sailor collar; they would never again give the adorable sailor salute they had given her last night.

“Sometimes strong feelings for its owner will give something a soul when it didn't originally have one. Like, so they can fill their debt of gratitude to the person who took such good care of them, or, on the other hand, maybe sometimes it can be because of a grudge or hate or something,” the low, staticky voice of the spirit possessing the radio murmured as it hung from her neck.

“Like how a spirit can possess a radio...?”

“I guess. You could say it's similar, except that the spirit doesn't come from a dead person.”

The dolls here must have been very well loved by their owner when he brought them into this world, and even after he went on ahead of them, they lived here the whole time, reproducing the

scenes from when they still had their master. If Kieli hadn't visited last night and things hadn't ended up like this, they would probably have kept doing it as long as the shop existed. Whether they would have eventually found happiness that way or if it was better that they were destroyed last night, Kieli didn't know.

She heard the dry sound of someone shuffling through the debris behind her. She turned her head to see Harvey, both hands (the one he had and the one he didn't) shoved into his coat pockets, walking toward her, running a casual gaze over the burnt remains.

"It's about time we get to the harbor."

"...Yeah," Kieli said, nodding, but stayed crouched on the ground for a little while, looking down at the doll's limp body. Then she lay it softly down so that its triangle-hatted head touched the ground.

She stood up, turned on her heels, and chased after Harvey, who had already started to walk away.

Rustle...

She heard the sound of rubble crumbling somewhere. ".....?" She stopped in her tracks and turned around once more. Just then, part of the mountain of debris swelled up and collapsed, and an arm with a metallic frame poked out from the scattered refuse.

"Ah...!" thinking the robot was okay, Kieli happily started running toward it, but then gulped and immediately froze.

All that crawled out to the surface, pulling the rubble toward it, was one robotic right arm. The metallic frame had been twisted cruelly apart around the joint of the upper arm, and its severed cables dangled like antennae.

The arm crawled around the burnt remains, pulling itself along the wreckage with its five fingers, as if looking for the shoulder it was supposed to be attached to.

Beside Kieli, who could only stand frozen where she was and watch, Harvey stepped forward without saying a word. He walked toward it a few paces, then stopped. After wandering around the tips of Harvey's shoes for a while, it started to climb up his leg like a beetle that had found its prey.

"Harvey...?"

Kieli's breath stopped at the understandably chilling scene, but Harvey showed no sign of aversion and let the arm do what it wanted. When it had crawled up to about his knee, he bent down lightly and grabbed the robotic arm with his left hand.

As Harvey picked it up, the arm wriggled its five fingers even more, as if looking for something, but it gradually grew more docile in Harvey's hand and soon stopped moving.

"Things like this can't exist all on their own, and if they don't have something to rely on, they can't figure out what they exist for anymore. These guys probably wanted you to be their new master."

"...And that's why they tried so hard to keep me here...?"

She thought of the robot's expression that looked as if it wanted to say something, and wondered if that was what it wanted to tell her...Engraving Harvey's words into her heart, Kieli regarded his copper-colored eyes, almost completely lacking in emotion as they looked down at the robotic arm—suddenly she thought that a doll with a soul might be more like an Undying than a possessed radio.

Undying—a dead body that is given eternal life by the "core" planted inside it in place of a heart. Before, when she saw Harvey with his core removed he was exactly like a normal doll, with his soul taken out...

After accidentally calling the scene to her mind, she shook her head, panicking to brush it away.

"What are you doing?" Harvey gave her a questioning look as he returned, robot arm in hand.

"Nothing..." She shrugged at him in vague response but then felt that she was acting even more suspicious and faltered.

"*It's perfect, Herbie,*" the radio's voice interjected, saving her. "*You were handicapped, right? Although you probably don't have what it takes to be its master.*"

"Excuse me for not having what it takes," Harvey retorted, his eyes narrow, to the radio's suggestion, one comment too many, but then seemed to consider it a moment before refocusing on the arm in his hand.

"...I guess it'll do," he murmured and sighed a complicated sigh blended with a wry laugh and some self-derision. Then, somewhat jokingly, he tried holding out the arm as though it was facing toward her for a handshake, and said, "I look forward to working together."

Kieli hesitated a little, then offered her own right hand. The instant her fingertips touched it, there was a short whirl of a motor, and the arm made a fist as if surprised; Kieli followed suit and pulled her hand back. "S not gonna bite you." Harvey laughed lightly, exasperated. She didn't know which of them he said it to; he

could have been saying it to both of them.

She reached out one more time, slowly, so as not to startle it. “It’s okay...,” she whispered quietly, and the arm opened its hand in understanding and timidly, softly took her palm.

CHAPTER 2

A HAND TO PROTECT YOU



“Hurry, hurry!” a girl urged her father. “Papa, if you don’t hurry, it’ll leave without us! Hurry, hurry!”

“You shouldn’t rush so much; it’s dangerous.” Her father’s voice came from behind her. His young daughter’s high spirits exasperated him, but he smiled drily, as if secretly enjoying himself.

The girl stamped her foot and waited impatiently for her father as he followed leisurely behind her, but soon she couldn’t take it any longer and started to run. The aisle was narrow enough to begin with, but now it was jammed with people coming and going, holding large bags. She weaved her way through them, ran up the iron stairs, her light footsteps ringing, and flew to the bright patch of outside light framed by a rectangle cut in the wall.

“Waah...!” Kieli and the girl flew onto the deck at almost the exact same time, and both cried out in excitement simultaneously.

The sand-colored sky opened out as far as the eye could see, and a flock of white birds spread their wings and flew comfortably along. The dry, sandy wind brushed through the girls’ hair as it blew past.

Kieli exchanged smiles with the girl who had, strangely, acted exactly the same way she had, and waved her hand lightly in farewell. The girl’s father arrived late up the stairs; she pulled him by the hand and ran toward the edge of the main deck overlooking the harbor.

Feeling a bit envious as she watched her go, Kieli peered through the entrance to the stairs, wondering what had become of her own companion. Despite all her beckoning, Harvey showed absolutely no sign of coming behind her. “*Damn old geezer...*,” the radio cursed quietly as it hung from her neck.

Fh-fhooo...

The steam whistle rang out long and low to announce their departure, and a vibration rose through her feet and reverberated in her belly. The thick smoke of fossil fuels spouted from the giant exhaust pipe in the rear of the ship, painting over the color of the sky.

Kieli turned and ran to the edge of the main deck, wove through gaps in the passengers who stood waving at the wharf, and leaned over the handrail.

Mechanics from the harbor and people watching friends and family leave lined up on the pier below, waving their arms. The sailors formed a line on the deck and responded with a salute. In a gesture said to have been passed down by the space sailors from the same pioneering age as the card game, they touched their right fists to their chests and thrust them forward—she remembered the dolls in the triangle hats from the night before and felt a prickling pain in her chest. Far, far down the barrier lining the coast, the promontory of tetrapods where she found the dolls the previous night looked like a small, white hill.

“Maaaster! Be careful! Maaaster!”

A shrill voice ringing out over the murmuring of the crowd broke Kieli’s concentration, and when she looked back, she caught sight of a plump woman wearing what appeared to be a maid’s uniform. She stood on the tip of the pier, waving a white handkerchief, tearfully shouting, “Master, Maaaster!”

The woman seemed so frantic that Kieli’s eyes were automatically drawn to the place the woman was looking, where she saw a boy standing at the edge of the deck close to the boat’s bow. Dressed from head to toe in formal clothes that must have just arrived from the tailor that morning, he was the very image of the son of a well-to-do family; she had no doubt that this was the boy the woman in the maid outfit was waving to.

The woman cared not a whit for appearances as she cried out to the boy, and he responded with curt whispers like, “Whatever, just go home,” and made gestures to shoo her away, but his voice wasn’t loud enough to reach the woman, so he was probably only trying to hide his embarrassment from the surrounding passengers. Kieli giggled and studied the boy’s profile. He looked like he was a few years younger than she was—a little over ten. His well-kept, light brown hair looked silky and soft; Kieli put a hand to her own short black hair and thought, *Come to think of it, I haven’t given it a decent combing in a while.* On top of that, it was all dry from being exposed to the wind in the wilderness.

When the pier was far enough away that no one could make out the faces of the onlookers, the passengers gradually started retreating to their rooms.

The last voice she heard was the maid woman’s piercing shriek echoing out, and, regardless of what the boy said, he seemed reluctant to leave the main deck. Once her calls, too, faded, though,

he left the handrail and turned away. A woman in a high-quality, but not flashy, dress walked very close beside him. She was a beautiful woman, with hair the same light brown as the boy's done up in a bun; she must have been his mother.

Just in time to replace the boy and the woman, Harvey finally came up onto the main deck. He passed by them at the entrance to the stairs and did a double take for a second, turning to look at the mother's back, but immediately returned to his usual blank expression and approached Kieli.

"You're late! We can't see the harbor anymore," she said, frowning. Harvey dismissed it with, "Whatever. I don't need to see it," and grimaced in annoyance at the sandy wind that blew through his hair, ruffling it playfully. But then he looked up at the sand-colored sky spreading above his head and—it was so subtle she couldn't have made it out without looking very carefully—narrowed his eyes as if he was enjoying himself.

"Those birds only have one leg," he murmured, his face still raised. Kieli blinked for a second then followed Harvey's gaze up to the air above. A flock of about ten sandy white birds flew above them, almost blending in with the color of the sky.

Harvey didn't say anything else, and just as she was wondering, puzzled, whether or not he was going to continue the topic he raised, the radio, determining that there were no people around, piped up: *"I heard once, a long time ago. Something about their genes mutating while they were being carried to this planet on the colonization ship so they got to be one-legged."* In the corner of her mind, Kieli wondered if by "a long time ago," the Corporal meant when he was still alive.

"They're migrating birds that wander all over the planet, all year long. In the winter, they go south; in the summer, they go north. Apparently the birds rest their wings for a bit on the tip of a tetrapod or the edge of a sail, then go right back to flying. They almost never sleep."

"They keep flying without sleeping? Don't they get tired...?"

"Dunno. 'Sprobably just how they are."

"Hmm..."

He could say that, but she still thought that flying all the time without stopping would be hard. They looked so calm in flight, but maybe they were really exhausted and wished they could fall fast asleep somewhere.

His expression erased, Harvey's gaze stayed fixed on the sky

above; he didn't show signs of moving from that spot for a while, so Kieli took just half a step closer and looked at the sky with him.



“Well? How do you feel about your first day on a boat?”

“It’s the worst,” Kieli answered Harvey’s spiteful question shortly and shoved her face in her pillow.

“*It’s because you get so excited and jump around so much.*” Even the radio at her pillow sounded exasperated. She turned her face away, pouting that even the Corporal was against her, and for a second, her eyes met those of the passenger lying in bed a little way away.

The third-class quarters on the ship weren’t individual rooms like the first- and second-class rooms, but group rooms, situated on the lower levels of the boat. Bunk beds lined either side of the center aisle; there were sixteen divisions in all, and a mix of about twenty people and mountains of luggage, which took up more room than each person, were shoved into each division. They were divided into upper and lower levels, so the ceilings were extremely low, and even Kieli had to duck a little in order to stand up, which meant that of course Harvey had no trouble hitting his head—actually, when he first came in, he hit it very spectacularly, raising a pretty murderous sound.

Harvey crept at random into a corner of the lower lever of the fourth division by the wall where they could see the ocean through a round porthole, so that officially became the sleeping place for Kieli and company for their ten-day ocean voyage. It was a small space, just big enough for the two of them to lie down in the cramped group sleeping room, and on top of that, the pillows and blankets provided were certainly not good quality. Even so, compared to their travels in the boxed seats of a train, it should have been a relatively pleasant journey, in that they could sleep normally.

It *should* have been. When she thought that these circumstances would go on for ten days before they reached the harbor on the opposite shore, even Kieli’s high spirits from when they set sail turned to utter exhaustion.

Because they were half forcing their way against the waves of flowing sand, the ship swayed irregularly, vertically and horizontally, throwing them in confused semicircles. Adding insult to injury, the low sound of the engine came from under the floor, incessantly echoing under her belly. She didn't think she was especially prone to motion sickness, but she felt absolutely terrible from right about the time she'd eaten lunch in the ship's cafeteria.

"Don't puke over there. I'm begging you."

"...I *know*."

Still lying down, she sent a hateful stare at Harvey and his heartless, unsympathetic comments. She wondered what Harvey had been doing, sitting by the round window—he tried to light a cigarette but couldn't control his right arm very well yet and ended up battling with it. The metal framework fingers that peered out of the end of his coat sleeve were holding the lighter just like human fingers would, but they would not move at all how he wanted them to, and only seemed to be trying to burn their master's bangs.

"Why aren't you cooperating?" Harvey asked, glaring narrow-eyed at his right arm, and, instead of answering, the arm threw the lighter away. "Now look, you!"

"*If I were to guess, I'd say he's trying to tell you that Kieli's got a hard enough time as it is—don't make the air any worse,*" the radio explained knowingly, and, in perfect timing, a playful tune came from its speaker.

"Oh, be quiet!" Kieli murmured, unable to take any more, and crawled out of bed. "I'm going to get some fresh air..."

It was the middle of winter, but the wind from the south was just cold enough to feel good and stroked coolly against Kieli's flushed cheeks. As she leaned on the deck's handrail and breathed the outside air, she began to feel much better.

The scenery that spread out on the other side of the rail was an endless ocean of flowing sand and a partly cloudy sky of the same color. At the far end of her vision, the two blurred into each other, forming a fuzzy horizon.

The steamship that was taking her to South-hairo in the southeast was called *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son*. Apparently a sand mole was a creature that represented good luck in the Sand Ocean. The boat was ridiculously big, but the fuel tanks containing the extremely inefficient fossil fuels took up much of the ship's bottom,

so despite its enormous size, it didn't have much usable space.

She could hear the sound of the screw propellers turning in the back of the ship, kicking up sand. A giant lump of metal, spewing billows of smoke as it dashed across the sand—that was the impression Kieli had of sand ships. Making full use of the main screw and several subscrews installed in the stern, it brushed aside the resistance from the flowing sand and forced its way over the surface of the ocean.

Near the bow on the opposite end, she could see a few of the crew in work overalls cleaning the deck. She casually focused her attention on them and watched them work, when...

Fwump...!

A familiar, vague sound flew to her ears. She only heard it faintly over the noise of the rotating screws, but that chilling blast, like something compressing the air heavily and releasing it all at once...

A carbonization gun...

The scene at the winch tower at the abandoned mines, when the Church Soldiers in their white armor blew Harvey's leg off, revived in her brain, and Kieli froze automatically, searching only with her eyes for the direction of the sound.

She heard another gunshot and turned her gaze in its direction to see a small person standing at the edge of the deck near the stern—when she recognized who it was, she doubted her eyes for a second. It was the boy she had seen when the ship set sail, the one the woman in the maid clothes had watched go. Using the deck's handrail for support, he had the uniquely shaped gun, with its fat, stocky barrel, trained toward the ocean.

She looked at where the gun was pointed and saw a flock of those one-legged migrating birds, flying low above the ocean.

"No!" Kieli shouted out of reflex and ran toward him. "Stop, don't shoot!"

She tried to capture the gun from behind but missed and ended up shoving the boy away. "Aah!"

"Waah!" The boy came dangerously close to going over the rail and falling into the ocean; she grabbed his clothes and hurried to pull him back up.

The two landed on the deck in a heap on their rear ends, and the gun flew away and clattered across the floor.

"What are you doing!?" The boy pulled himself up immediately

and tried to pick up the carbonization gun.

“You shouldn’t have things like this!” Kieli slid across the deck, positioning herself between him and the gun, and grabbed the gun in both hands—it was strangely light for its weighty appearance, and when she blinked and looked down at it, she sensed that it was smaller around than the carbonization guns she remembered. On careful inspection, she could tell it was made of plastic.

“...huh?”

“Don’t act so confused! It’s a *toy* gun!” the boy spat in irritation at Kieli and snatched the gun out of her hands. Kieli remained where she sat and gaped up at the boy with a stupefied look on her face.

“A toy...?”

“Yeah, a toy. They’re really popular in the capital right now. Don’t you know anything?” The boy laughed through his nose, clearly mocking her for being a country bumpkin. “Isn’t it cool? It’s the weapon the special squad of Church Soldiers uses. They used these to kill all the ‘Demons of War’ and end the War.”

Kieli didn’t think it was cool, nor did she envy him for having one. She thought his notion of history was pretty messed up, but when she learned it wasn’t the real thing, the energy drained out of her body all at once, and she lost the willpower to say anything about it.

“That scared me...”

She slumped and took a deep breath. The boy looked questioningly down at her, insulted her—“Weirdo”—and set his toy gun back toward the ocean.

As the plastic bullet burst into the air with a *fwump*, it startled the flock of birds, who scattered and flew away. She was relieved for a minute, but after she thought about it, she realized that, while it might be a toy gun, it still seemed to have enough power to hurt and kill small animals.

“Hey, they’ll be in trouble if you hit them. They might die.”

“Of course; that’s what I’m going for,” the boy answered simply, looking sideways at her as he propped the gun’s barrel up vertically, just like a real one, and loaded the next charge. He said it so smoothly that Kieli couldn’t counter right away. Before she could say anything, he aimed at the flock of birds that had fluttered back into place and pulled the trigger again.

Half a second after the shot rang out, at the same time that the

flock scattered, there was a light *fwip*, and one of the birds fell into the sea, drawing a white line.

“Ah!” Kieli crawled to the edge of the deck, stuck her face through the rail, and squinted at the ocean’s surface. Sand the same color as the fallen bird swallowed it up, and it was out of sight in the blink of an eye.

“Yesss, I got him!” the boy cheered, swinging his gun over his head.

Beside him, Kieli stared down at the sea in terror, then snapped her face up and looked accusingly at the boy. “Why would you do that?!”

“One or two birds is no big deal. Look, there’s still so many left.”

“There aren’t!”

She raised her voice in spite of herself, and the boy blinked in surprise. “Why are you so mad...?” It was like he really didn’t understand the meaning of what he had done.

Kieli calmed herself a little and said, “You see, the bird you just shot was the only one of that bird, and of all the birds there, that one is gone now.” As she softened her tone and tried to explain, she sensed something at the edge of her consciousness.

She cut herself off and looked back at the ocean and saw a black shadow jump up, stretching out of the surface of the ocean exactly where the bird had fallen. Like a big black bird...

She thought she saw the shadow turn an abrupt right angle in midair; it faced their direction and charged at them, like a sudden gust of wind. She watched the giant black bird, with its slanting, almond-shaped eyes and sharp beak, open its bright red mouth and rush straight at them...!

“...!” Kieli cried a voiceless scream and ducked.

Its enormous mouth was about to swallow Kieli’s head whole... but just then, the shadow vanished and a strange wind—it was warm but came with a chill that made her hair stand on end—blew through her body.

“...wha...huh...?”

She froze solid, sitting on her rear, her face pale. “What the heck? What is it this time?” the boy’s dubious voice rained on her from overhead. “Just now...!” She regained her senses and ran her gaze over her surroundings, but the giant bird’s shadow was nowhere to be seen.

"Ugh. Here," the boy said curtly and offered her his hand. As Kieli stared blankly at the boy's hand, which wasn't much different in size than her own, he breathed a grown-up sigh and said, "You can't stand, right? You're so much trouble, ugh."

"I can stand." Kieli flatly refused his favor and, though she staggered a little, stood up by herself.

The boy frowned, unamused, and went on to ask, "Where's your room?"

"...The fourth division in third class," she answered suspiciously, and the boy blurted out, "Oh. You're poor," unapologetically, then hung the toy gun's strap from his shoulder and started to walk away. He stopped at the deck's exit, turned to look at Kieli, still standing there speechless, and said in irritation, "Aren't you coming? I'm taking you to your room."

"Whaa—?" Kieli's jaw dropped, and she let out a deflated gasp in spite of herself. How was she supposed to interpret *that* from his attitude?

The boy betrayed no sign of being bothered by her reaction and simply ordered, "Hurry up." He slipped through the crack in the thick, half-open door and went down the stairs that led inside the ship.

After a pause, Kieli, still unable to comprehend what was going on, trotted after him.

"Hey, promise me. Don't shoot any more birds with that gun, okay?" She addressed his back as he went ahead of her down the gloomy stairwell. The boy didn't stop but only half turned his face back toward her. He squinted at the bright outside light behind her, nodded with a scowl, and said, "...Okay. I won't shoot any more birds."

Kieli skipped down the stairs to walk beside the boy.

The two small figures just barely fit next to each other on the stairway; their footsteps echoed rhythmically as they descended to the lower decks where the third-class rooms were. Standing next to her, the boy was somewhat shorter than she was, and she thought that, while he acted all high and mighty, he really was younger than she was, and she felt a small sense of kinship with him.

"Are you in first class?"

"I'm in special class."

"Wow."

"Special class" designated the rooms used by the especially rich.

She had walked around looking at the ship for a while after departure, but there was a limit to how many places a third-class passenger could go. Of course she couldn't even get close to the special-class rooms. (Naturally, Harvey was completely indifferent and stayed shut up in their room, so she took the Corporal, and they explored, just the two of them.)

The boy seemed to cheer up a bit to see her sincerely impressed, and his attitude softened a little.

"Come play with me later. I can give you some chocolate."

"But isn't your mother with you?"

"I'm alone. Someone's going to pick me up when I get to the other port."

"Hmm, so you're traveling alone." Kieli started to nod in ordinary agreement, then gasped and stopped. The boy looked back at her wonderingly, so she hurried to catch up with him, remembering the beautiful woman that walked with the boy when they set sail. That woman...

"Kieli," a voice called to her.

It certainly wasn't a loud voice, but it reached Kieli's ears easily; she blinked and looked up. Down the left-hand side of the squalid aisle, lined on either side with third-class rooms, she could see a tall, redheaded figure at the entrance to the fourth division. The heel of his shoe was just coming down on the outside of the division's door.

"You're late. I thought you really were puki—" Harvey started to say but cut himself off and shifted his gaze to the boy standing next to her. "Who's that?" he asked, in a tone that wasn't particularly friendly or particularly the opposite.

"Um, well, we were just on the main deck, and..." Kieli tried to answer, but an expression of caution suddenly flickered across Harvey's normally near-expressionless copper eyes.

"C'mere, Kieli."

"Wh-what?"

His low voice intimidated her, giving her no room to argue, and she ran a few steps toward him; he grabbed her arm, and hurled her behind him. "What are you doing?!" She immediately turned around to protest, but it would seem Harvey no longer had her in mind; his back was to her, and he confronted the boy head-on.

"Go back to your room right now, pull your blanket over your head, and stay quiet," he flung a sharp voice at the boy, apparently

unconcerned about things like “going easy on children.” Kieli got scared in spite of herself and gulped. The boy faltered for a second himself, but, not to be outdone, he flared up and glared at his tall opponent.

“What’s with you, all of a sudden? Do you know who you’re talking to?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. Get out of here.”

“Wha...?!” Harvey’s words disarmed him; the boy opened and closed his mouth a few times, speechless with rage. “What?! You’ll regret this!” was all he finally managed, spitting the none-too-creative line over his shoulder as he turned his back to Harvey.

“Ah, wait!”

“Never mind, don’t follow him. Leave him alone.”

Kieli tried to go after him, but a metal-framed right arm blocked her way. Kieli turned accusing eyes on its owner.

“What’s wrong? Why are you so...,” she started to say before the shrill sound of breaking glass rang through the aisle, as if it were running through the walls.

Instinctively, she ducked her head and cast a glance past Harvey toward the end of the aisle. Passengers in the third-class rooms were sticking their heads through doors on either side, looking around to see what happened.

One of the bare lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling had shattered—the filament itself had blown away and gone out, as if it had exploded from the inside.

Directly underneath it, in the center of the glass shards strewn across the aisle, the boy had sunk to the ground in terror.

“It’s okay, I’ll go. You stay here. Get inside.”

“Eh?! Just a...”

Harvey made the first move and ran off before she could do anything, so Kieli just stood there, defeated before she could even get started. She could only gape and watch, helpless, like the other passengers who watched questioningly as Harvey helped the boy up and took him away (although it was close to picking him up and carrying him like a piece of luggage).

She didn’t know where it had appeared from, but she could see a black shadow with birdlike wings flying after them over their heads.



“What’s your *problem*?! Put me down!”

Oh, I’ll put you down, he muttered inwardly, his substitute right arm moving accordingly and flinging the boy onto the bed. (It might be a little funny if the prosthetic arm was *always* good and carried out what he wanted it to like this, but it frequently acted on its own, so he was a little fed up with it.)

The special-class rooms were for passengers who received special treatment; these suites occupied more than half of the available space on the second-level deck—each one had a living room and bedrooms roughly the size of an entire division of third-class rooms, with all kinds of small rooms attached. Apparently the boy was using his ridiculously wide suite, which looked smaller than it was with its walls crowded with so many tacky decorations, that Harvey had to wonder if he really needed so many all to himself.

In all likelihood, he was the son of a very wealthy merchant, or else a family of high social standing—in other words, a family of high-ranking clergymen in the Church. That would make him the sort of person that Harvey wanted to avoid as much as possible.

Damn, now she’s involved with somebody even more trouble than usual...

“Whoa!”

The boy kicked off of the bed toward him, so his conditioned response was to take half a step back and dodge him. The boy screamed and toppled over without Harvey doing a thing. “Dang it...” He struggled under the blanket he himself had kicked out of place and sent a hateful glare in Harvey’s direction. (*Like that was my fault?*)

“I can tell my dad and have you put in jail, you know!”

“Yeah, they’d probably kill me before they took me in,” he replied; his tone, at least, was casual, but inwardly, he seriously tightened his guard. So the father really was with Church leaders, and if he had the right to arrest people, he must be involved with Church Soldiers. In other words, the kind of person Harvey was least likely to get along with.

From Harvey’s point of view, this was no laughing matter, but the boy seemed to think that Harvey wasn’t taking him seriously

and became even more furious. “You don’t believe me?! It’s true—”

That instant, a shadow ran across the light cast by a chandelier on the ceiling. “Get down!” He instinctively sensed danger before he could tell what was overhead. He thrust the boy onto the bed and lay over him, in a kind of embrace.

Bang, bang, bang. He heard small, explosive sounds one after another, like the firing of a handgun, and glass shards fell on top of them, like a sprinkling of rain. He felt pain near his ear for a second, but he cut off the feeling immediately. In his arms, the boy let out a muffled scream.

The explosive sounds and the downpour of glass continued to fall for what felt like a few minutes, but in actuality, it was probably only a few dozen seconds—finally, he heard the last piercing sound of glass bursting, and bigger shards scattered across his back.

That signaled the end, and the room fell silent again.

“Making a big damn show...,” he cursed under his breath. When he finally picked himself up, the glass that had piled up on his back slipped off and fell onto the bed and carpet. It didn’t look too different from a bunch of sugar candy strewn all over the floor. Though it literally wasn’t anything so sweet.

The small bulbs of the unnecessarily extravagant decorative lights that had been strung together like beads were all completely smashed, and the bedside room light and the twilight that came through the round porthole in the wall were all that dimly illuminated the room. The chandelier’s frame, now resembling an animal’s bleached skeleton, remained alone in the center of the ceiling.

A small, pitch-black bird perched on the edge of that frame. As it stood there, folding its wings, it blended almost perfectly with the darkness enveloping the ceiling, and only its slanted, gold-colored eyes glinted with a sharp light as it stared in their direction.

Harvey’s eyes met the piercing, golden gaze, and he glared back for a few seconds, then looked down at the boy on the bed, who was still cowering and gaping at the glass scattered around him, his face pale. His hands trembled slightly as they clutched the blanket, and he muttered something; his voice was hoarse, and Harvey couldn’t make it out, but he figured it was probably something along the lines of, “What was that?”

Harvey breathed a light sigh and knelt beside the bed.

“Just three days. Don’t leave your room, keep that over your head, and stay quiet. And whatever you do, don’t get near anything that’ll break. Got it?” he said, looking the boy in the eye and softening his tone, though only a little. The boy sluggishly met Harvey’s gaze.

An apologetic expression suddenly rose to his face. He hung his head and whispered, “...I got it. I’m sorry...”

“Huh?” Harvey couldn’t help asking; he wasn’t sure he’d really heard the boy’s unexpectedly complicit reaction.

Maybe a crew member had come and cleaned up before he got back to the third-class rooms on the third-level deck, because the pieces of glass were out of the way. (Though Harvey couldn’t say it had been a thorough job; the shards were just swept off to the side.) There was no replacement bulb hanging from the ceiling, though, and that one area of the aisle, which already felt closed in between its walls on either side and the low ceiling, sunk into an even deeper darkness, creating a dreary atmosphere that hung about the whole area.

The passengers who had looked on dubiously before had all either gone back into their rooms or gone out to the main deck for a walk or something, and there was no sign of anyone in the aisle.

Except for Kieli, waiting at the entrance to the fourth division.

“You got cut?” Kieli said as soon as she saw Harvey’s face, standing on tiptoe and reaching out a hand.

“What?” he replied out of habit, then touched his face and realized that it was bleeding. He had completely forgotten the pain, but apparently a shard from that chandelier had indeed cut him. Now he understood why the boy suddenly apologized so eagerly. Harvey’s cheek had been sliced all the way to his left ear. Had he been a normal person, the wound might have caused a big commotion.

“Are you okay?”

“Leave it alone; it’ll heal.”

He blocked Kieli’s hand as she tried to touch the wound and made do by wiping the blood off with the sleeve of his coat. Looking carefully, he saw he had a similar laceration on the back of his hand, and his coat was torn in places, primarily on the left side. (If only it had concentrated on his prosthetic right arm instead, it wouldn’t have cut his hand.) He swore under his breath and took

his coat off as he ducked down through the door of their room.

Maybe a lot of passengers had gone outside—the number of occupied bunks was relatively low. Discarded bedding cluttered the floor. Harvey could deal with the squalid, cramped space and the ceiling that was so low it might as well have been taunting him, but it was annoying always having other people nearby, so he felt a little relieved.

He burrowed, half crawling, to their space by the window, and the radio, who was apparently bored after being abandoned beside Kieli's pillow, was the first to speak. "*You're causing trouble again, aren't you?*"

"Try telling me where that 'again' comes from. *She's* the one always causing trouble, not me."

He glanced sideways at Kieli, who took off her shoes and crawled in after him. She frowned and retorted, "So explain to me what's so much trouble in a way that I can understand. You come back with all that blood pouring out, look at me like nothing happened, and you won't tell me anything...!"

"Oh, uh..." Harvey winced inwardly, sensing a faint hint that she was about to cry mixed in with her accusatory tone. "This really is fine, so don't worry about it." He sighed and sat down on his bed; then, lighting a cigarette with his left hand because he wouldn't be able to stand it if his right hand tried to stop him again, asked: "Corporal, you know about curse birds, right?"

Harvey handed off the conversation to him, and the radio spat in disgust, "*You really just aren't gonna explain it yourself, are you?*"

"Curse birds?" Kieli sat down next to him and brought her face, full of interest, close to the radio, so the Corporal continued, figuring there was no helping it.

"*They're cursed birds that bring bad luck by breaking glass and lights and things. Sometimes they haunt people who kill animals for no reason. They don't have that much power, so if you stay somewhere that doesn't have anything breakable, they're not that dangerous.*"

"...That boy shot a bird. It was with a toy gun, though," Kieli interjected, a meek look on her face. Harvey remembered that the boy was holding a toy gun, then understood why the bird appeared, and huffed in annoyance, "Good-for-nothing kid..." along with some smoke. If he'd known that before, he would have popped him one before coming back.

"I wonder if he'll be okay."

“He brought it on himself. Leave him alone,” Harvey retorted emotionlessly to Kieli’s concerned murmur. There was another reason, standpoint-wise, he didn’t want to have anything more to do with the kid. “*Well, it’s okay for him to get hurt a little. It’ll leave in two or three days.*” For once, the radio’s opinion matched Harvey’s.

With her companions casting the matter aside, Kieli faltered, but still unable to come to terms with it, she persisted. “But he said he wouldn’t do it anymore. I think he just didn’t understand.”

“It’s not something you can forgive just because he didn’t understand. Just leave him alone. Don’t you dare go check on him.”

“...You’re like that boy in some ways, too, Harvey,” she added innocently.

Harvey didn’t like that; he lay down, cigarette still in his mouth, and looked away.



The aisle on the second-level deck had a completely different atmosphere than the aisle on the third-level deck, which resembled the inside of a giant metal pipe. A chandelier elegantly illuminated the long corridor, and a carpet so thick it was actually *harder* to walk on lay over the floor. Intricate knockers worked into the shape of sand lions adorned the otherwise uncouth thick iron doors.

Kieli stood on her toes and lightly tapped the knocker.

There was no answer, so she knocked again, a little more forcefully, and after a while came a muffled voice: “Who is it?”

“It’s me,” Kieli replied, about to name herself, but now that she thought about it, she hadn’t given him her name to begin with.

It was the morning of their second day at sea—one night had passed since she’d heard about the curse bird, and Kieli had sneaked onto the second-level deck where the special-class rooms were.

“It’s me, remember? We met yesterday.”

“...It’s open.”

Once she got an answer, Kieli turned the heavy handle in both hands and pushed the door open. “I’m coming in. Hi ther—” She peered into the dismal room and couldn’t help swallowing her voice.

The chandelier on the ceiling, the room light by the wall, the glass door of the cabinet, the decorative plates on top of it—every type of ceramic in the room had been smashed to powder. Fine glass crystals lay thick on the floor; it was almost pretty.

There was no sign of anyone in the living room, so she very carefully stepped over the glass shards and went farther inside to peer into the bedroom.

The boy was on top of the king-size bed, clutching his knees, his blanket over his head. Only his eyes peeked out from the shadows of the blanket and acknowledged her presence. A black bird perched on the top of his head, but as she entered, it spread its wings and flew up to the broken chandelier on the ceiling.

Kieli checked to make sure there wasn't anything breakable around anymore and slowly walked toward the bed.

"You're not hurt?"

The boy's face was pale, but he shook his head and asked, "What about him?"

Kieli thought for a minute about what he was talking about, then answered vaguely, "Harvey's fine. There was a lot of blood, but it wasn't deep." Actually, if it had been a few millimeters deeper, half of his ear would have been cut off, but it seemed that, to him, his torn coat was a bigger problem. Acting very grumpy as he wore just the one light shirt, he had taken care of the blood by sticking his head in a washbasin and roughly scrubbing it away. The metal framework of his prosthetic arm had understandably drawn a lot of attention, so he seemed to want to wear layers as much as possible.

"Oh, that man's name is Harvey. He doesn't have much of a personality, but he's really very..." There were so many things she could finish "really very" with that she couldn't choose one right away and so stopped there. "I'm Kieli." In the end, she settled on just giving her own name.

The boy stayed silent and gazed at her from under his blanket, but apparently he cheered up a little, and his stiff expression softened. "I'm Julius. You can call me Juli. Juli and Kieli, it's perfect. But only my mom calls me that..." His voice started off bright but trailed off, and his face sank again. Kieli sat down on the corner of the bed that didn't have glass shards piled on top of it.

"When did you lose your mother?"

"How did you know that? Did I tell you?"

"Oh...I guess you did?" She ended up giving another vague response. She sighed inwardly at herself and for no reason looked up at the ceiling, where her eyes met the black bird, standing there like a tiny statue in the darkness. It was a small animal, but its unblinking golden eyes bore a sense of intimidation that seemed to multiply as they weighed down on her.

"Last year." Julius, who had been silent for a little while, opened his mouth in a whisper. He went on in a voice that was no more than a murmur, still hugging his knees under his blanket.

"We buried her in her hometown in South-hairo. It was a year ago. But Dad only ever thinks about work; he doesn't think about going to visit her grave, and when I told him, fine, I'll go by myself, he tried to send me with seven maids. I'm not a kid anymore. I can ride a boat by myself."

As Kieli listened, she imagined seven of the woman in the maid outfit who saw him off at the pier when they departed, swarming around the boy, burning to take care of him. She almost couldn't stop herself from laughing, but as he wasn't telling a funny story, she kept a straight face and glanced over at Julius. Actually, his expression was no longer serious, as if telling someone had made him feel better.

"I'm hungry! I haven't eaten anything since yesterday; I'll go ask them to bring me something," he suddenly shouted, and threw his blanket off. "I'll ask for something for you, too, Kieli. I bet they don't have anything good in the third-class cafeteria."

Perfectly cheered up, he took Kieli's hand, stood up, and started to walk toward the door. Kieli panicked. "You can't, there's still—" she said, trying to stop him, but just then, she sensed something moving above her head.

She gasped and raised her face; the black bird that had been so still until then had alighted from the chandelier and started to fly in circles around the ceiling.

"Wait, you shouldn't go outside yet!" She hurriedly pulled Julius's hand back, but the boy was singing "I'm hungry!" to himself. He tugged at her hand and dashed out into the hall.

"We'd better go back. This is dangerous."

"It's fine. See, nothing's going to happen. It's creepier staying in that room."

"But..."

As Kieli trotted after the boy pulling her hand, she kept

glancing back, watching for the bird. Every time she did, she almost tripped and fell on the thick carpet; she started to get the feeling it had been put there to torment her.

Fortunately, as they passed through the hall on the second-level deck, none of the chandeliers broke, and no glass rained down on them. But that seemed to completely dispel Julius's fears, and when they got up the stairs to the first-level deck, the boy didn't hesitate to run toward the dining hall. It wasn't meal time, so no one was around using the hall; he went right through it and strode boldly to the adjoining kitchen.

The kitchen! Kieli's heart almost stopped as she considered just how many breakables there would be in such a place.

"You can't go in there!"

"Chef!"

She grabbed Julius's arm and this time was determined to stop him no matter what it took, but by then, Julius had already peered in through the kitchen door and was calling out haughtily to the head chef. A young person who seemed to be an apprentice stopped working and looked up. When he recognized the boy, he seemed to panic and threw the same line—"Chef!"—toward the back.

Flap, flap, flap... Kieli heard the sound of wings flapping loudly overhead.

Immediately she jumped and looked up. The ceramics piled on the first shelf in the cupboard along the wall burst in a straight, horizontal line, as if strafed by gunfire.

"Uwaah!" Julius and the young apprentice screamed in simultaneous shock. As if to interrupt their cries, the tableware on the second shelf and then the third shelf shattered into powder. Kieli instantly bent over Julius's head to protect him.

The shards poured down like a white rain, filling her vision; the sound of the ceramic downpour struck hard against the floor. She gritted her teeth, preparing herself for the impact of shrapnel hitting her back.

But the deluge of glass she'd braced herself for didn't strike, and after a bit, the sounds of shattering and raindrops stopped.

".....?"

Before she realized it, the kitchen became intensely quiet.

From the neck down, she maintained her tight hold of Julius as she cautiously raised her head to look up.

A woman with long, light brown hair was shielding both of

them, protecting them.

When Kieli's eyes met hers, a smile rose in the woman's gentle eyes, and she murmured something. *I'm sorry my son causes so much trouble. Thank you...* That's what it sounded like.

The instant she melted into the air and disappeared, the pieces of pottery that had outlined the contours of her back slid to the floor in a gentle rustling sound.

"Kieli, are you okay?!" Julius asked, pushing Kieli's hand aside, standing up, and grabbing her shoulders in a panic. Kieli had been staring at the empty space where the woman had been; she slowly fixated on the boy in front of her, caught his gaze, and smiled.

"I'm fine. I'm not hurt anywhere."

"Oh, good..." Julius sank to the ground, apparently relieved with all his heart. "I didn't know what I would do if you got hurt protecting me..."

Kieli let out a wry smile, seeing him so drained of energy; he must have been very worried. *He does have a bit of a troublesome side, but he really is a very honest, kind boy; don't worry.* She wished she could have told the woman, but she was probably still by his side, watching over him, so she might have already known.

"Wh-what on earth...? Master! Y-y-you're not hurt, are you, Julius, sir?!"

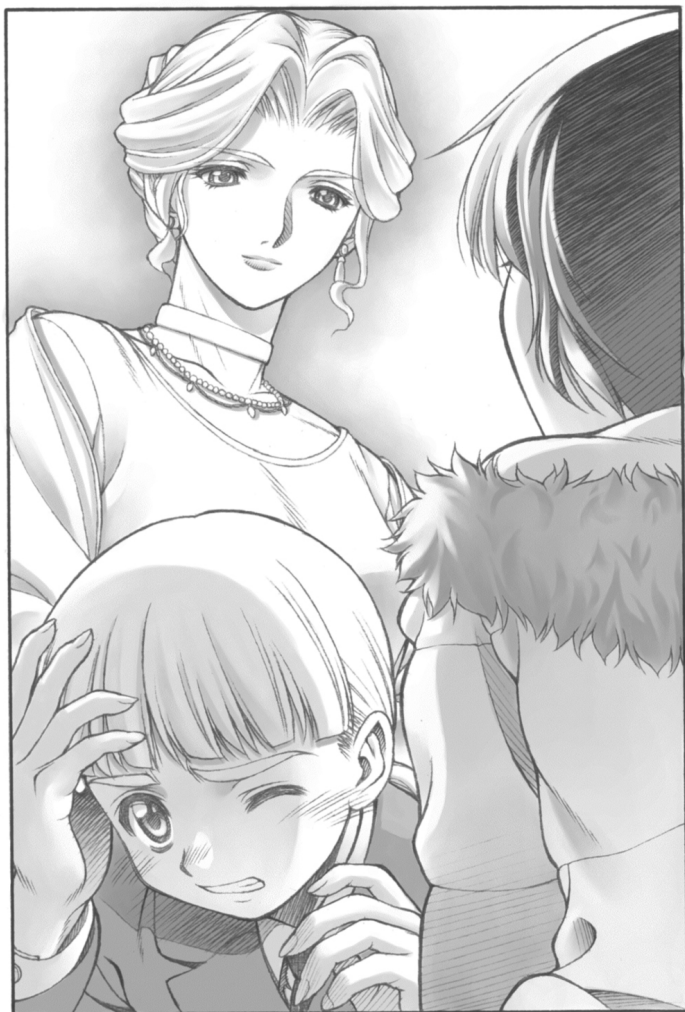
A man wearing white clothes whose buttons looked like they were about to pop over his potbelly—he must have been the head chef—came toward them, moaning. Along the way, he delivered a magnificent kick with his knee to the young apprentice cowering on the floor, sending him head-first into the plastic garbage bucket. Watching this confusion from the sidelines, Kieli and Julius looked each other in the face and simultaneously burst out laughing.



"The one thing I just can't understand," Harvey cursed, disgruntled, as he leaned on the deck rail with his cheek in his hand watching the flock of migrating birds flying over the ocean, "is why didn't the mother's spirit appear when it happened with *me*? She doesn't care if *I'm* the one getting hurt taking hits for that kid?"

"There's no one less worth protecting than you. You won't die even

if we kill you, after all.”



“Not like I care...” Harvey looked diagonally up at the sky and sighed, then shifted his eyes to look to his left. Kieli hung limply over the rail, as if thrusting both of her arms into the ocean. The cord of the radio hanging from her neck dangled down toward the sea.

“*Kieli, I’m begging you; do not vomit on me,*” the radio emphasized, swinging at the end of the cord.

Kieli’s head drooped as she muttered spitefully, “*Even you’re being mean to me today, Corporal...*”

“Don’t be a baby. You’re the one who blatantly ignored people’s warnings, you meddler.”

“But!” She raised her head and started to respond, but when she did, she felt the urge to vomit. She covered her mouth and bent down. “*Hey, you okay? You look pretty bad.*” Understandably, a smattering of worry was interwoven in the radio’s voice.

“I feel sick...”

“Argh, you’re such a pain,” Harvey spat in annoyance, kneeling beside her and lightly rubbing her back. “I didn’t think you’d have such a problem on boats...” His true feelings surfaced despite himself. She had so looked forward to getting to ride a boat, and to be honest, he felt sorry that it turned out like this. Still, it wasn’t as if he could trade places with her.

“He’s lucky...,” Kieli suddenly murmured, crouching and burying her face in her knees.

“Why?” Harvey asked, still rubbing her back.

“I wish *my* mom would turn into a ghost and come see me...,” she continued under her breath, almost to herself, after a few seconds of silence.

Harvey’s hand stopped automatically. Kieli went quiet after that and turned a downcast gaze toward the deck at her feet.

Harvey let his eyes wander around the area, but it wasn’t as if there was a script posted for him anywhere, so he scowled as if he’d swallowed a dozen bitter bugs. In the end all he could think to do was ruffle her hair.

“Kieli!” a cheerful voice and the sound of light footsteps jumping up the stairs cut in, and Harvey looked back to see, as expected, the very boy in question flying through the deck’s entrance. Kieli raised her face, too, and acknowledged the boy’s

presence. She smiled a little and tried to stand up. As he took her arm to help her, Harvey threw a sidelong glance at the boy running toward them.

He couldn't make out the shadow of a bird following him. Apparently it disappeared faster than predicted.

"I got you some seasickness medicine," the boy panted, stopping in front of Kieli and thrusting out his hand triumphantly. Harvey saw that the boy was clutching a bag of pills and yelled inwardly at himself, *Oh, medicine! You should've thought of that.* He never had any use for stuff like that, so it never occurred to him.

"Come to my room. If you take that and have some warm chocolate, then take it easy, you'll get much better."

"Yeah, but..."

Kieli looked troubled and checked Harvey's mood, but his existence didn't seem to register with the boy; he took Kieli's hand and whined, "Let's go. Come on, why not?"

Harvey couldn't help feeling irked. Even so, he really didn't intend to do anything about it. It was times like these, though, when his right arm moved of its own volition, and it grabbed the boy by his collar. "Wah, what the heck?!" the boy cried out in protest, hanging in the air like a kitten.

"Harvey?"

"It's not me; it's doing it on its own," he excused himself, indicating his right arm with his eyes when Kieli turned blankly back at him. "*Ohh...?*" the radio murmured from above Kieli's chest. *What did he mean, "Ohh...?"* "I'm telling you, it wasn't me!" Harvey grimaced and averted his gaze, looking at the migrating birds overhead, but the boy was throwing a fit under his chin—this was not a good time to be quietly admiring the scenery.

"Ow!" He took a surprise kick to the shin and regretted yelping before cutting off the pain.

CHAPTER 3

COME DOWN THE STAIRS TO WHERE I
AM



“Ohhh. Did you *want* me to stop you?”

Now that she thought about it, everything that happened that day started with that one line of Harvey’s.

It was the afternoon of *The Sand Mole’s Seventh Son’s* fourth day at sea as it continued its cruise to South-hairo port. After taking a late lunch in the ship’s dining hall on the first-level deck, Julius invited Kieli to come play in his room—Harvey’s prosthetic hand had hung the boy up and chased him off the day before, but today he specifically had a special-class passengers’ lunch brought to the general passengers’ cafeteria and was determined to eat lunch beside Kieli, whether anyone liked it or not.

Silver and porcelain tableware crowded together on the hastily laid white tablecloth, and the boy wore an indifferent look on his face as he consumed every little bit from the expanse of elaborate dishes that had been laid before him like works of art. He said (sticking a forkful of guinea fowl pie into his mouth) that he would have them bring some for Kieli, too, but Kieli felt like crying just watching him, so she refused the offer. She had recovered thanks to the medicine, but she still didn’t have much appetite. Even the meager lunch provided for general passengers was too much.

“Let’s play cards in my room. The cards I have are limited edition; there’re only five decks like them in the whole world. I’ll make an exception and let you see them, Kieli,” Julius said, wiping his mouth with a napkin (he really was only a little older than ten—when he was done eating, there was sauce and cream all around his mouth) and smirking proudly. “Wow, cool,” Kieli smiled and nodded, half impressed and half disgusted as she thought about his toy gun that looked just like a carbonization gun and all the other fine toys this kid had. She cast a glance at Harvey, sitting across from her.

“Harvey’s good at cards. Right—”

“I’m not going.” He refused before she got the invitation out. Kieli faltered, at a loss for words, so instead, Julius frowned as if to say, “Forget about that guy,” got up from his chair, and grabbed Kieli’s hand.

“You can come by yourself, Kieli. Now come on.”

“Hmmm...” Kieli answered vaguely and checked Harvey’s mood

as she stood up.

While Kieli and Julius were eating, Harvey, on the other hand, didn't touch his food; he rested his crossed legs on the table (unmoved by Julius scolding his bad manners) and fiddled noisily with the back of the radio. The metal frame of his prosthetic hand peeked out of the right sleeve of the shirt he'd halfheartedly pulled on, holding on to a screwdriver a little awkwardly and tightening the radio's screws.

"...Well, I guess I can go for a little bit. Will you be back in our room?"

"Dunno. Probably," Harvey responded apathetically, and Kieli for some reason fell speechless. Harvey stopped working for the first time and looked up.

"What? You can go. I'm not gonna stop you." He blinked blankly at her, then, as if something suddenly occurred to him, "Ohhh. Did you *want* me to stop you?" That line.

"N-not really!" Kieli raised her voice in spite of herself. "Let's go, Juli," she said and ran from the dining hall with such force that now she was pulling Julius.

When she stopped, just once, at the door to look back at their table inside, Harvey was looking back down at his hands and had resumed his work as if nothing had happened. She knew that she was getting her hopes up for no good reason, but Kieli got annoyed anyway and turned back around in a huff. She joined the flow of people going back to their rooms from the cafeteria and set out into the hall with Julius.

It was true that he was never social, but even so, for some reason, he was so thoroughly brusque when it came to Julius that she could almost say he was doing his best to ignore the boy's existence. She thought that he was maybe a little...but...

"Hey, I thought maybe he was jealous of me," Julius suddenly declared as they went down the staircase to the lower deck. "Wh-wh-what's this now?" Kieli asked stutteringly in response; she could feel her face go red at having the boy speak her inner thoughts, as if reading her mind.

"Well, no matter how you look at it, he's definitely not very nice to me. *Anybody* would think he was jealous," Julius answered with a scowl, but he immediately changed to a lighter tone. "But maybe I was wrong. Today he didn't seem to care about you at all, Kieli. I guess he just had a bad attitude because he always had a

bad personality.” Kieli wondered about how he put it.

“Ah-ha-ha...Harvey and I aren’t like that.”

“Then what *are* you like?”

“What are we like...?”

He struck back with the ultimate question; Kieli laughed it off and fell silent, the smile still on her face.

He could go ahead and ask what their relationship was like if they weren’t like *that*, but she didn’t have any strong evidence to define it; it was a weak relationship—she didn’t even know how long they could be together. First of all, if, for the sake of argument (and only for the sake of argument) they *were* in that kind of relationship, even then, she just couldn’t imagine Harvey being jealous. Even before the question of how he felt about Kieli, she figured he never got attached to anyone or anything enough to be jealous. What was she getting her hopes up about?

“Tch. I don’t get it. Why are you with a guy like him, Kieli?”

Kieli fell silent, so Julius puffed his cheeks unhappily and turned away. Kieli let out a complicated, dry laugh and glanced at the boy’s profile.

“Huh?” That was when she realized that Julius’s feet had led them past the second-level deck, where the special-class rooms were, and were headed down to the third-level deck. “Where are we going? Your room’s not this way,” Kieli asked, thinking it odd.

“Heh-heh. Don’t worry; just follow me. I thought of something more fun than cards,” Julius said, laughing mischievously in response, as if he wished she’d asked him sooner. “I found an interesting place a little while ago.”

“An interesting place?”

“Yup. We can explore. A secret passage.”

“A secret passage...er, shouldn’t we stay out of there?” She started giving an honor-student-type response, but even Kieli’s curiosity was aroused upon hearing about a secret passage. She and the radio had walked around the ship on their first day, but because there was usually a limit to where third-class passengers were allowed to go, her range of exploration had been narrow. Fossil fuel tanks might have occupied most of the space, but in a ship this big, there were surely a lot of places she hadn’t seen yet.

The stairways the passengers used ended at the third-level deck, but when Julius urged her to look carefully at a blind spot in the stairwell, she saw a steep, narrow stairway continuing farther

below.

It probably went down to a fourth-level deck, and though she could see a passage going off to the side underneath the stairway, it was so dark she could hardly make anything out.

She balked a little when she looked down the stairs, so Julius went first and stepped on the staircase. It was very steep, so he went down backward, clinging to the rail. When he'd gone a few steps, he stopped and looked up.

"It's fine, it's fine. I said it was secret, but the crew uses this stairway, so there's nothing dangerous."

"But we told Harvey we'd be in the special-class rooms..."

"Why do you have to tell him every single place you're going?" Julius frowned, offended, when she brought up Harvey's name, then dropped his gaze and started briskly down the stairs.

"Wait! Juli...!"

Kieli hesitated for a minute and stayed in place, but after she thought for a second, she ended up turning backward like Julius did and stepping down onto the stairway. "...Ugh, it's hopeless."

Her "it's hopeless" was just to keep up appearances; really, she wanted to go.

I guess he really won't be jealous at all even if I do go off somewhere with Juli...

She couldn't expect anything, but even so, she wished he would show just a little bit of jealousy. She also thought that if Harvey really didn't think enough of her to be bothered by it at all, she had better be seriously prepared for the possibility of his ditching her as soon as they got off the boat...

It was dark underfoot, so the stairs felt very far apart. Kieli descended slowly, one step at a time, testing her footing with her toe for each stair. After a bit, there was a feeling of stability under her shoes that was different from before, and she knew that she had reached the bottom. When she raised her face, she could see the light from the third-level deck, like a sky cut in a square above her.

"Kind of a dull place." Julius, having reached the bottom first, looked around and scowled. The air below-deck seemed to confine some kind of smell, and Kieli found it a little suffocating, too. She squinted down the dim passage that extended beyond the stairs.

Bags of materials and sand lay in heaps on either side, squeezing the already narrow aisle to half its width. There were electric lights, but they were far apart. Dull light seeped from the

ceiling at equal intervals, like a dotted line of little islands, forlornly illuminating the way.

Partly because of the stagnant basement air and partly because the low vibrations reverberated in her belly more strongly than on the upper decks—possibly because they were close to the engine—the seasickness Kieli had suppressed with the medicine started to sneak its way back. The vegetable stew she had just eaten felt like it was making its way back up from her stomach...*Enough of that.*

Her own imagination was making her even sicker, and Kieli was thinking she would go back after all, but Julius, on the other hand, didn't hesitate to start walking down the hall.

Kieli decided that Julius had no right to say a word about Harvey's personality; the two were exactly alike in that they only moved at their own pace, never considering their companion's feelings. And in that they would both seem to remember along the way and half turn with an expression that said they just knew the other person would be following and bark things like, "Hurry up."

Kieli looked up at the light above the stairs, sighed a complicated sigh, and then trotted after Julius, who had stopped to wait for her.



He tried going back to their room for a bit, but it wasn't long before he could no longer stand the oppressively thick crowd. Halfheartedly, Harvey pulled his shoes back on and left the room again.

When he got into the hall, he sighed in disappointment, put his hand on the wall, and looked around as he pulled his workboots over his heels. There wasn't a soul on the third-level deck; only the lightbulbs swung slowly from the ceiling in time with the ship's vibrations.

Huh. We're really rocking...

Maybe the waves of quicksand had gotten higher; apparently the swaying had gotten somewhat heavier. Still, he was fed up with laying low in his room, and since he could only think of one other place to go, he naturally turned his feet toward the stairs when the radio dangling from his left hand suddenly complained, "*Not the*

deck. Think of the damn annoying wind from this damn, good-for-nothing sand ocean and remember I'm a piece of delicate, precise machinery."

"There's nowhere to go *but* the deck. Man, you complain a lot," Harvey shot back, glaring down at the radio, wondering where it got off calling itself delicate.

The radio had been whining all morning about how its insides were all rough and he didn't feel so good, so he opened it up and found that minute particles of sand had gotten inside and were preventing it from functioning properly. He scraped out the sand, and now that the radio was feeling better, of course it was complaining again. Next time it broke, maybe he'd leave it that way.

Maybe the spirit had possessed the radio so long, they'd fused together; Harvey thought that these days, the Corporal's mode of living (though that was a weird way to put it) had started to resemble exactly that of a radio's. The soldier's spirit rarely formed itself out of static anymore.

"You could go to the special-class rooms. Kieli's there, and it should be quiet."

"You're kidding. I told you who that kid is, didn't I?"

"You told me. Why don't you tell Kieli? Should you really have let her go?"

"...There's nothing wrong with letting Kieli act normal. I don't have to worry; she's not the type to go blabbing to strangers."

He imagined that, in her case, if she knew Julius's lineage, far from interacting with him normally, she would get all awkward instead, so he had no intention of telling her now. If he could make it to the end of the trip without being discovered, there wouldn't be any major problems. Of course, that didn't mean there was any reason he had to be all friendly and join their card game (first of all, he wouldn't earn any money), and it didn't change the fact that the kid was somebody he wanted to avoid with all his energy.

Man, all the extra anxiety I have to deal with because we happened to get on a boat with a problem kid, he cursed in spite of himself, irritated.

"What? So you act like you don't care, but you really are jealous. You're so immature," the radio said in a teasing tone.

"I don't need to be mature." He brushed the radio off with the first thing that came out of his mouth, partly because he had been

lost in thought and kept walking three steps before he stopped. "Look, you..." What was that radio talking about?

"Why would I be jealous of that pug-faced little brat?"

"You may think he's a kid, but at that age, they get big really fast. And Kieli doesn't seem too unhappy with him, either. Don't tell me you're not a little upset."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you..." He sighed, exasperated by the radio's somewhat flippant tone. "He would be good for her; he's rich, he's got social status, and he's got a stable future," he answered, casually averting his attention from his conversation partner and directing it at the stairway ahead of him as he walked.

"Do you seriously mean that?"

"Yeah, I'm serious. If that brat'll take her in, that might be better for Kieli, too—gah, what the—?!"

All of a sudden, his right arm swung up, and Harvey looked as if he was about to hit himself; he bent backward instinctively and ended up punching the wall beside him. The sound of a dull shock shook the wall and reverberated down the hall like a wave.

Crap...

Terrified, Harvey automatically froze in place, but it would seem that the shock didn't echo into the surrounding rooms, and there was no sign of any passengers peering out suspiciously. He waited a little, then breathed a sigh of relief; when he moved his hand slowly away, there were small cracks in the wall, and pieces of it fell to the floor.

"It's mad 'cause you're saying those uncute things."

"Shut up. It isn't funny," he snapped, interrupting the radio's jokes. "...Don't ever do that again. Next time you act up, I am seriously going to throw you into the ocean. Remember that," he whispered murderously, glaring down at his right arm, the color still a little drained from his face. It was no empty threat. If it did something like this in front of people, they would definitely know it wasn't normal.

He didn't know if it was being good and obeying orders or if it just lightly shrugged him off, but his right arm's consciousness stowed itself and fell under his control.

"Give me a break..."

First the radio, now this arm—somehow, he always found himself surrounded by weird, inhuman things. But he knew that he had no right to talk.

Maybe it was part of his abnormal regenerative powers as an Undying, but the place where the carbonization gun had blown his arm off and the metal framework of his prosthetic arm had started to fuse together strangely, as if eating into each other. Not only that, but it was like his nervous system had gone ahead and connected with the cables from the metal arm, and he was starting to be able to move it naturally, as if his own nerves were inside it—that is, as long as it didn't assert itself like it did now.

He wiped the shoulder of his shirt against the cold sweat that had broken out on his forehead and sighed.

.....?

When he looked up, an unnatural light coming from behind the stairs in front of him suddenly caught his eye.

It was just a light, dimmer than the bulbs illuminating the hallway, oozing from the stairs' blind spot, and wouldn't really grab the attention of just anyone walking past. He approached it casually, leaned halfway over to peer at it, and saw, unexpectedly, an inconspicuous staircase leading below-deck. The dim light came from below those stairs, which gaped open like a mouth to darkness.

"Interesting. A secret stairway, huh? Let's go down it."

"It's probably a work staircase. There's not gonna be anything down there."

The radio made its suggestion in a lively voice, making Harvey think, "He's not a kid. What is he expecting?" Harvey, on the other hand, lost interest after the one glance and started to leave. *"You're boring. Have a little more interest in life; let's have some fun,"* the radio insulted him in disappointment, but Harvey decided he didn't need advice from a spirit in a radio whose own life ended long ago and ignored him.

When he went back around the staircase, he was stopped short.

"Is something the matter, sir?" Apparently someone had sneaked up on him in the minute his guard was down; a voice suddenly came booming down from above.

His conditioned response was to brace himself inwardly and turn his head back. A person eyed him suspiciously from the stairs' landing. The man wore a whitish jacket with a stand-up collar—the captain of *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son*; Harvey had caught a glimpse of him when they boarded the ship. The normal crew all wore work overalls. Only the captain had that uniform, which is

why it left an impression.

“The sand’s resistance has gotten stronger, so the rocking will continue for a while. I would like for you to wait in your room until we’ve reached a safer stretch of ocean.” He made it that far before furrowing his brow cautiously; maybe the captain realized that Harvey had just come from behind the stairs.

“That area is for crew only. Do you have any business back there?”

“It just caught my eye, and I was taking a look. I was feeling sick. I was on my way to the deck.” He had no reason to feel guilty, but he strung a bunch of excuses together out of habit.

“*Like you have that delicate a constitution,*” the radio interrupted quietly. Harvey heard a short protest of static as he held it behind him and kicked it with his heel.

“Well, all right, then. You really didn’t go down there, did you?”

“I did not go down there.” After answering, Harvey thought dubiously that the man was strangely persistent on that point, but by then the captain had come down to where he stood and said, “I don’t mind if you go out to the deck, but be careful not to fall overboard. We’re swaying quite a bit, after all.” The captain indicated the upper level and made room for him to pass, so Harvey left feeling like he was being chased away.

When he looked back after a few steps, the captain was still standing there as if planning to watch (or “keep an eye on”) him until he was completely gone.

“If you don’t feel better, you’re welcome to visit the medical office.”

“...Thanks.” Harvey wasn’t really seasick or anything, but he had nowhere else to go, so for now, he wound up with no choice but to stick with his original plan and head for the deck.



“Juli, do you mind if I say something?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“I’ve been wondering about this for a while, but is it possible...”

“Yeah. What is it?”

"That maybe we're lost..." Kieli whispered meekly to the light brown head in front of her. After a second, Julius, who until then kept walking forward, stopped abruptly.

"Actually, I was thinking that, too..." he turned around and confessed with the same meek expression.

"I knew it."

Kieli sighed and looked up at the ceiling. The bare lightbulbs hanging from it lit their very narrow surroundings with a seeping yellowish light that seemed to ooze into the darkness. The lights swung slowly back and forth to the swaying of the ship, and their shadows on the floor stretched and shrank like they were separate creatures.

The hallway ahead of them seemed to stretch straight ahead, but when she looked back the way they had come, for some reason, it curved gently, and she couldn't see very far down it. What's more, as long as they were facing forward, the passage seemed to follow a single path, but when she looked back, narrow passages extended to the sides like splinters, so even if they wanted to go back, she couldn't tell anymore which way they had really come. She also got the feeling that they'd been going around in circles, but the types of baggage piled up in the aisle changed slightly, so they were probably getting *somewhere*.

She was sure that if he found out she'd gotten lost inside the ship, Harvey would get completely exasperated with her and say things like, "It wouldn't happen to be your hobby to cause problems for me, would it? And that's why you keep getting into so much trouble?"

It would be nice if they could get back before Harvey found out...

She glanced back at the walkway behind her as she let her thoughts run; when she faced forward again, Julius was gazing at her, his dark green eyes clouded with anxiety.

"It's all because I brought you down here..."

"It's okay, it's okay. Don't make that face." Kieli forced a smile so she wouldn't get too somber. "We don't have to worry; everyone will come looking for you when they realize you're gone, Juli. You are a special-class guest, after all."

She felt kind of guilty, acting all grown-up and trying to cheer up the boy feeling the way she did. It wasn't just Julius's fault. The truth was, she'd been thinking things that appalled her, like maybe if the two of them went off somewhere Harvey would get a little

jealous. *I wonder if Harvey will be mad...* It would be okay if he complained to her face, but if all he did was sigh at her without a word, she wouldn't be able to defend herself. Those were the times when Harvey was really in a bad mood.

Heeey, this way. Over here...

"Ah...! Look, someone's already here." She heard someone calling in the distance (what good timing!), and Kieli stamped out all her inner anxieties and peered forward. At the end of the hall, lit here and there with the dull light from bare bulbs, she could see a crew member wearing light, sand-colored overalls.

When she acknowledged that she had seen him, the sailor beckoned to them and started walking farther down the corridor.

"He says it's that way. Let's go, Juli."

The overalled back melted into the gloom and soon disappeared. They'd be in trouble if they lost sight of him, so Kieli urged Julius on and started trotting down the hall. Julius followed her in a panic and called, "Was somebody there?"

"You didn't see the sailor?" Kieli asked without turning around. "But you heard him call us, didn't you? He said 'over here.'"

"Who did?"

"Like I said, the sail...", she started to answer but cut herself off and suddenly stopped running. They were right at the spot where the crewman had beckoned them. "Wah, what is this all of a sudden?" Julius protested as he almost crashed into her, stopping just short.

Kieli didn't answer but stared intently down the hall where the crewman had vanished. The corridor had gotten narrower, and sandbags were piled up on both sides, leaving just enough space for one person to pass. She squinted down the tunnel but couldn't distinguish any sign of the crewman—only the dotted line of round lights from their bulbs just barely floating into view. It wasn't unlike a will-o'-the-wisp urging them onward, showing them the way.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Julius asked dubiously.

"Hmm..."

She finally turned around to face him and said, "Sorry. It must have been my imagination after all. Let's go back...", apologizing vaguely.

Just then, the floor under their feet swayed violently, like a

giant wave, and Kieli couldn't help tottering backward, clawing at the air.

The hanging bulbs swung in great arcs, hitting the ceiling, and their lights flickered. Julius staggered, too, and immediately his outstretched hand grabbed at the sandbags, dragging one out from the middle of the great pile.

Kieli fell backward to the floor as the sandbags fell in an avalanche. A low rumbling like thunder shook the air, reverberating off the ceiling, and clouds of sand swirled up, obscuring her field of vision.

"Juli!" Kieli went pale and called the boy's name as she coughed through the thick clouds of dust. She leapt to her feet and clung to one of the sandbags blocking her way. "Juli, are you okay? Answer me, Juli!" *Don't tell me he was crushed...!* The worst-case scenario ran across her mind, and she cursed herself for being so careless as to come farther down the hall.

"Kieli...!" She heard a muffled voice from the other side of the wall of sandbags. "Kieli! Kieli, are you okay?! You're not crushed, are you?" the boy's voice demanded anxiously.

As he'd taken the words right out of her mouth, Kieli opened and closed it two or three times; then she sighed in relief and sank to the floor. "That scared me..."

"Oh, good. I was afraid you'd been crushed!" On the other said of the wall, Julius sounded relieved, too.

"Ugh, that's my line. I thought my heart would stop."

"I'm fine. You're not hurt, are you, Kieli?"

"No. But..." she started ambiguously, raising her troubled face. Bundles of sandbags made of special fibers piled heavily up to the ceiling, completely blocking the hall. She grabbed the nearest one with both hands and tried pulling with all her might, but even one of them was easily twice Kieli's weight, and it wouldn't budge. She could tell that Julius was doing the same thing on the other side of the wall.

"This is bad..."

"I'll go get someone."

"You'd better not move. We don't want you getting more lost." Sensing him turning to leave, Kieli pressed her face into a space between bags and called out to him in a panic. "You stay there, Juli. I'll figure out something from this side. I'll find the exit and get Harv—"

"I can take care of this without his help."

It was a mistake to be so quick to invoke Harvey's name. It sounded like Julius was leaving as he spoke, but by the time she tried to stop him—"Wait, Juli!..."—his light footsteps had already pattered back the way they'd come.

...He's gone. What'll I do...?

Still looking up at the wall of sandbags, Kieli stood where she was, at a complete loss.

He'll be okay, right...?

Come to think of it, Julius had his mother's spirit guarding him, so the unthinkable most likely wouldn't happen. She consoled herself with that thought and sighed, "Whew..." leaning against the sandbags.

Now that she was alone, the area grew quiet. Kieli started noticing the sound from the engine at the bottom of the ship more acutely and began to feel sick again.

It was too much to stand up, so she crouched down and hugged her knees, sandbags at her back.

I've felt like this before. When was it...?

A certain scene suddenly floated to her mind. It was when she was living with her grandmother in their apartment in Easterbury, so she must have been five or six—she was crouching down like this, sitting at the edge of the apartment stairs. Light from the setting sun shone through the hall window, casting a rusty orange glow on her feet. *Creak, creak.* She heard the old stairs groan, and when she looked up, she saw her grandmother carrying grocery bags at the bottom of the stairs. She hurried to hide her left cheek with her hand, but it was too late.

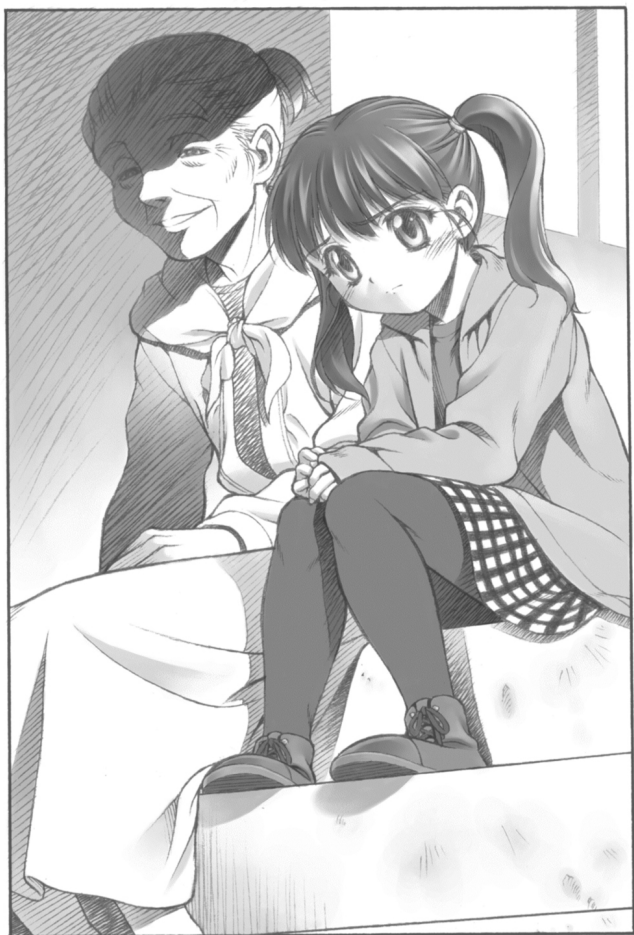
Her grandmother spotted her swollen red cheek and frowned. "What happened?"

"...I had a fight with Dini from the first floor."

Dini from the first floor was the landlady's daughter, and even though she was a year younger than Kieli, her attitude was three times as big. When Kieli answered sullenly, her grandmother put her bags down on the stairs without a word and sat down next to the girl. Grown-ups didn't really sit on stairs, and her grandmother was someone who respected that formality, but when she spoke seriously to Kieli, she made sure their eyes were on the same level—in other words, right now, she was asking for a serious explanation from Kieli. But she wouldn't say anything.

Kieli stayed quiet for a while, but in the end, she couldn't bear the silent interrogation and confessed, still looking down.

"...Dini's doll talked. She said that Dini was repulsive. So when I asked what 'repulsive' meant, Dini looked at me like I was weird and took the doll away. She's weird. A talking doll is way more weird than me. And then Dini said that she was only playing with me because her mom said that she had to because she feels sorry for me. When I asked why she felt sorry for me, she said it was because I say weird things sometimes because I don't have a mom. Then I told her that *I* felt sorry for *her* because if I had a mom like her mom, I wouldn't want a mom. Because I hate the landlady. Then Dini started crying and grabbed me." Kieli explained the incident very quickly, then got nervous at her grandmother's lack of response and glanced sideways to gauge her mood.



Her grandmother had listened to her story, her eyes focusing on her hands folded over her lap, but at length she stood up quietly, saying, "We're going to apologize to Dini and her mother. Come now."

Kieli looked unhappily up at her grandmother.

"Why? I didn't do anything wrong."

"You said a mean thing to Dini. Anyone would be sad if someone said something bad about her mother. Now come along."

"Really? I didn't know..." *I mean, I don't have a mother.*

Her grandmother no longer answered but picked up her grocery bags and started once again down the stairs she had just climbed. Kieli still didn't know what she had done to Dini, but when she looked down at her grandmother's small back with its hunched spine, she felt a prickling in her heart. It was because she took Kieli in and because Kieli was a little weird sometimes that her grandmother had reason to feel small in the apartment building.

Was Dini right? If she had a mother, would she not be the weird girl that caused trouble for her grandmother...?

Why am I remembering this? It happened so long ago... Kieli wondered inwardly at herself, leaning against the sandbags and looking up at the ceiling. The ship didn't rock as violently as it did before, but it kept swaying sideways a little more than usual, and the dull light from the bulbs hanging from the ceiling swung left and right.

She figured it was because she saw the spirit of Julius's mother that she was dredging up the few memories she had related to her own mother, whom she rarely thought about. Kieli hadn't had a mother for as long as she could remember, and she didn't think that she had ever felt particularly lonely because of it before now. Julius always had his mother's spirit beside him, and he had lots of people to worry about him like that lady in the maid outfit. She knew it was childish of her, but to be honest, she really was a little jealous.

Maybe that was why she suddenly felt so dissatisfied with Harvey's cold attitude...

...What do I do? What if no one comes to find me?

The instant the thought popped into her head, anxiety quickly spread throughout her mind. *What if I can't make it back to the top*

before we arrive at port? What if Harvey and the Corporal get off the ship and go off somewhere without me...?

She hung her head and clasped her knees tightly. "Help me, Harvey..." She wasn't even aware that she was muttering his name. And she felt pathetic that she had brought this on herself.

This way...

Kieli heard a voice somewhere. She gasped and looked up. For a second, she imagined it was her grandmother's voice, but it was male. The voice of that crewman.

Come over here. This way. Hurry, hurry...

She looked to her right and left, and the voice crept into her ears again. It sounded strangely distant, as if it was coming from far away, but like it whispered in her ear at the same time. She squinted down the passageway, but all she could see in the faint light cast by the bulbs was the corridor continuing dimly ahead with its bags piled on either side; she couldn't pierce the darkness beyond it.

Clinging to the voice, she leaned away from the mountain of sandbags and stood up.

Her nausea had subsided significantly while she was thinking. She kept a hand on the walls of bags lining the hall and moved forward into the gloom.



That was some jolt...As long as I don't fall over, he thought in the corner of his mind, as he climbed the dim stairway and emerged through the door and onto the deck. The minute he squinted into the white outside light, a misfortune he hadn't considered literally flew up in front of him.

"Uwah!" Harvey yelped involuntarily and caught the plank that very nearly hit him in the face with his right hand. He heard the dull clang of metal striking metal.

"That was close..." he grumbled, looking to see what had come at him. It was a raft made of buoyant styrene resin plastered over a one-meter square of zinc planking. It had been positioned on a key spot on the deck in case of an emergency.

"Why would something like this fly at us?"

"Hell if I know," Harvey spat at the radio, holding the raft so he could lean against it and look around. He saw several crewmen working feverishly at something toward the stern. Apparently one of the wires holding the rafts in place had come undone, and about a dozen rafts had scattered across the deck. The crewmen were trying to collect and restack them, but right now it appeared that it was all they could do to chase after and catch the rafts as they slid in the wrong direction every time the ship rocked.

"Wow, they've got it rough," he muttered in a tone that even he realized was completely lacking in sincerity.

"You can't work up even a little desire to help them out?"

"I'm just a normal passenger that came up here to distract himself from seasickness."

"....."

He watched the confusion as the crewmen ran around in the same way he would have watched a fire on an opposite shore. A sailor clung to one of the rafts as it danced, flapping above the deck. He noticed Harvey and called out to him. "Heeey, excuse me, could you bring that over here?"

"Oh. Right..."

He remembered that he was leaning on the raft that had accosted him, using it as a windscreen, and sighed. It seemed he'd have to get involved after all.

He dragged the raft carelessly over. "Oh, thanks." The sailor held out one hand as he supported the raft with the other, then suddenly exclaimed blankly, "Ah."

"Aren't you...?"

".....?" Instinctively Harvey's guard came up as the man scrutinized him, but the next moment, he gave the same reaction as the sailor: "Ah."

He had a relatively small build for a sailor (still, it was much different than Harvey's), and Harvey had a faint recollection of the slender, somehow frail-looking face with its round, rimless glasses. He wasn't very memorable compared to Tattoo and Whiskers, but this was the man who, following suit, went by the nickname Glasses

at the card house at the port.

“So you’re a passenger on our ship.”

“But I almost failed to earn my fare thanks to you three.”

“Ha-ha-ha, you got it back magnificently. Man, you’re good. And you know when to quit. I thought sailors had a patent on cards; did you have a teacher or something?” the sailor said, laughing to show he bore no hard feelings.

“...Sort of. A long time ago.” Harvey just brushed it off vaguely and gazed at the other crewmen running around the deck chasing rafts. He didn’t see the other two, Tattoo or Whiskers, anywhere.

“Oh, they left the ship after our last voyage. Had a fight with the captain,” the sailor explained, guessing what he was thinking. “So they needed some money to get by. You seemed pretty out of it, and we thought you’d be an easy target. That was some miscalculation, eh? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha.”

“Ha-ha...” Harvey laughed drily. He thought about hitting the guy, but he was somehow drawn in by his good-natured way of speaking.

“Hey, stop slacking!” yelled a threatening crewman who seemed to be the sailor’s senior, so their conversation ended there, and the sailor with round glasses ran back hurriedly, dragging the two rafts with him. Harvey planned to stay uninvolved and watch him go, but the senior sailor spotted him and called politely to him, “You, too. Come over here and help us tie ’em down!”

“Why should I—”

“We’re short on hands. One of our guys ’as been missing since last night. Lying down on the job somewhere in an emergency like this, the moron.”

“Hell if I care...,” he cursed under his breath. But when someone offered him a wire for tying the rafts down, he took it in spite of himself, and in the end, he found himself helping after all. (He just knew the radio at the end of the cord around his wrist was chuckling.) While two crewmen held the rafts down, two more used the wire to fasten them to their supports on the handrail.

“What’s the big emergency?” he asked as he tied the woven-iron wire around the support, and the round-spectacled sailor answered, pulling another wire next to him.

“Apparently one of the subscrews isn’t working. Normally, it’s no problem as long we have the main screws, but the sand is flowing fast today, and it doesn’t look like we can get through if

we're not fully operational."

"Is that why we're rocking so much?"

"One of our guys just went to look at the screws; he should be back soon."

"Heeey!" another voice loudly overlapped the crewman's. A new sailor flew through the deck entrance and ran over, waving both arms.

"Everybody, come help! All the bags fell over in the corridor in the power area; it's blocked!"

"Aren't I always telling you to clean that place up?!"

"We'll do it later! Right now, we need to—"

"It's always 'later' with you people! How many more hundreds of laters do you need?!"

Harvey indifferently let the rough exchange of loud voices go over his head, but when he noticed half the face of a small boy peeking out behind the new sailor's back, he frowned. The boy made a face that obviously said, "Uh-oh!" and ducked his head.

Before he could say anything, the senior crewman caught sight of the boy. "If it isn't Master Julius. What's the matter?"

"I found him lost in the power area. He says there's still a girl inside..."

The instant Harvey heard that, he let go of his wire without a word. "Waah! Hey, don't just let it go!" the sailor in the round spectacles objected as the taut wire whipped backward and the rafts it held in place fell over again. But Harvey wasn't in a mood to care; he walked quickly away toward the deck's entrance.

"I'll help. Where is it?" he asked, passing the sailor who had come to report. "You two are nothing but trouble..." He glared casually at Julius, still hiding behind the sailor; the boy cowered but shot a rebellious look back at him.

"It was my idea. If you're gonna get mad, get mad at just me. Kieli didn't do anything wrong."

"I'm not gonna lecture you. It's none of my business," Harvey cut him off, and the boy fell speechless.

He flapped his lips, then his cheeks flushed red, and he spat, "You're impossible! I have no idea why Kieli would hang out with a guy like you!"

"...Yeah. I don't know what she likes about me, either," Harvey muttered under his breath, looking sideways at the boy as he signaled the sailor to show him the way and started to leave.



After following the corridor that the voice called her down for a while, Kieli ran into a wall and, confused, found herself searching along the cold wall, looking for something.

Her palm touched a handle, like a lever.

I thought it was a dead end...

After a moment's hesitation, she grabbed the lever with both hands and tried pushing it. She heard a heavy *clunk*, and an iron door opened on the other side of the hall.

A sandy wind blew in from somewhere, ruffling her hair. Lukewarm air like from an exhaust port, a thick smell, and the sound of rotating screws filled the passage. A little ahead of her, in the gloom, a single bulb hung from the ceiling; relying on its light, she squinted at her surroundings. She couldn't tell for sure, but she seemed to have come into a wide space.

The instant she crossed the doorway and cautiously set foot on the other side, her field of vision suddenly blurred as she dropped directly downward.

"Hya!" she screamed and kept falling a few dozen centimeters. "...Owww." She turned around, rubbing her rear end after striking the floor, and saw that the door and the floor were on different levels with a simple set of steps between them. "Ugh..." she grumbled her misplaced anger and glared up at the door behind her.

Help me...

She heard the voice, closer than before.

Placing both hands on the floor and lifting herself up a little, Kieli strained her eyes toward the interior. She saw someone crouching under the lightbulb. She could see only half of him as he blended in the darkness, but someone wearing the same sand-colored overalls as the sailor that had beckoned to her in the corridor was on all fours, crawling on the floor, looking for something.

He lifted his head slowly and looked her way—

The instant Kieli saw him face-to-face, she gave a twitch of a

scream, then swallowed.

The left side of his body was completely gone, as if it had been torn off. An eyeball dangled by a liquidy string from his torn left eye socket, and the eye, which shouldn't have been able to move, rotated and looked at her entreatingly.

"No..." Kieli, still on the ground, groped at the floor with her hands, trying to back away. She couldn't work up the energy she wanted; her heel slipped, and the bottom of her shoe hit something. What was it?

Startled, she looked down, and that "something" caught her ankle.

"

No, *let go!* she meant to scream, but the air just stuck in her throat and wouldn't come out. The ghost and the corpse both had her by the ankles and dragged her farther inside. The smell of the tepid wind got stronger—faintly through the gloom, she saw a giant screw rotating and crunching up sand. If a person got pulled into there, he would be a lump of meat in no time...!

"Heeeey!" a muffled voice suddenly echoed behind her.

She thought the ghost looked blurry for a second, as if the vibrations from the interjecting voice had stirred it up, and then it vanished into the darkness.

Kieli stayed frozen in place for a while, unable to move. "...!" She tried to exhale the breath she'd been holding, but her throat choked up and all she could do was hiccup.

She still felt skin on her ankle.

"Heeey, is anybody in there?" She heard the deep voice again, and with it, the sound of a muddle of approaching footsteps.

"Damn, that was a lot of work. You'd better get that all put away before the day is over!"

"Easy to say, but there's nowhere to *put* any of it."

She turned her head haltingly to see large men, wearing the same overalls as the dead body, appear in the door, talking noisily. "Oh, there you are," they started to say casually, catching sight of her sitting on the floor, but, "Ack..."

When they noticed the corpse lying on the floor at Kieli's feet, every one of them opened their eyes wide in shock. "Kieli, are you okay?!" Julius popped out, slipping between the adults, but of course, he, too, went speechless and stopped in his tracks.

Behind Julius, Harvey finally showed his face. He glanced at the scene, almost glaring at it, and muttered, "You idiot..." Then he made his way past Julius and the sailors who stood petrified in the doorway, staring at the corpse as if they didn't want to get close, and jumped over the threshold.

That's when Kieli finally realized that, although the body was reaching his hand out to her for help like before, his palm was only touching her ankle and wasn't actually grabbing her. Kieli sat down near the door, where she had first fallen. She hadn't been pulled into the room—no, looking carefully, she saw that there *was* a trail in the sand on the floor where she'd been dragged half a step, and she shuddered again.

"Seriously, you." Harvey cursed in exasperation as he knelt

down beside her. He grabbed the corpse's hand indifferently and peeled it off Kieli's ankle. "It wouldn't happen to be your hobby to cause problems for me, would it? And that's why you keep getting into so much trouble?"

"Ah. N..." She could speak now, but it only came out in meaningless puffs of air, and Kieli opened and closed her mouth feebly a few times. "I'm, sorry..." she finally managed, forming her first real sentence. Instantly, tears spilled from both her eyes, which had been forgetting to blink.

"Look, here. If you're gonna cry about it, then don't go off on your own to begin with. I'm really gonna get mad," Harvey lectured in a tone that sounded as though he was already a little mad, so she bit her lip in an effort not to cry. *What am I doing? Here I get the childish idea that maybe I'll test him a little, so I do things I shouldn't, cause trouble I shouldn't, and get him even more annoyed at me.* "I'm—I'm sorry, I'm sorry..." She hung her head and tried to hold in her sobs, but it just wouldn't work, and she kept apologizing in a tearful voice that seemed to keep sticking.

"Argh, that's enough." Harvey breathed a short sigh over her head. "That's enough. I get it."

He ruffled Kieli's hair with his left hand, as if he wasn't quite sure how to deal with this.

"That's the guy we haven't seen since last night. Come to think of it, it was his shift to maintain this place..." muttered one of the sailors who, perhaps finally deciding to get close, crouched down next to the corpse and checked the mutilated face of his colleague. Kieli raised her face, wiping away tears, and saw a sailor with a slender face and round glasses looking a little disturbed. "We meet again, little lady." He smiled.

The other crewmen gathered around, murmuring. Apparently Julius was the only one who still couldn't bring himself closer; he kept a nervous watch, only his face emerging from the sailors' shadows.

"One of the subscrews *did* stop; looks like there's a big wrench stuck in there! Dragging half a person with—blegh..." a sailor reported loudly after going farther in, but he cut himself off midway, as if needing to hold in his lunch.

"Pull him out, quick. Then get right to repairs. Be careful not to let the same thing happen again; I don't care if any of you die, but the last thing I want is that screw breaking!" an intimidating sailor

a size bigger than the rest ordered the crewmen in a bitter tone. He spoke mercilessly, but Kieli got the feeling his voice trembled ever so slightly when he looked down at the corpse and muttered, "I wondered where the bastard was sleeping, damn..."



Once the screw was restored, *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son* broke away from the whirlpool of flowing sediment and into safer sands at full speed. By nightfall, the ship was progressing smoothly along again in the calm sand as if nothing had happened.

Kieli leaned against the rail of the deck, gazing into the distance of the night ocean. The ocean's surface had sunk to a deep blue-gray, and she couldn't see far. If she calmed her mind and listened closely, though, she could faintly make out the sound of sliding sand amidst the rotating screws that filled the deck.

The cold night wind blew past, ruffling her hair against her face. She shook her head, swept the troublesome strands away, and pulled her coat collar closed. The open air that was the perfect temperature in the afternoon had of course gotten quite frigid after the sun set.

Reclining on the rail beside her and smoking a cigarette, Harvey regarded Kieli. "Let's go inside. You're not feeling well."

"Yeah. But I want to see that first," Kieli answered, burying her chin in her coat collar and indicating with her eyes the crewmen who had gathered at the stern.

A light hung from one of the supports, and three, four sailors were preparing wires underneath it. Two other crewmen had just carried a whitish, rectangular box over to them. They had turned a box for materials into a makeshift coffin. Kieli watched placidly as they started fastening the coffin to the wires, but she suddenly realized something and quickly turned around. She got the feeling Harvey had just said something genuinely nice...

Looking back at her and blinking, Harvey wondered what was wrong all of a sudden. "No, I just want to go inside, is all," he added halfheartedly, averting his gaze. "*You really just can't be honest with your feelings, can you?*" the radio hanging from Kieli's neck interjected for her.

"You were a little jealous, weren't you? So you're feeling bad about it, and you're thinking you should change your attitude. Am I right?"

"Give it a rest. Besides, what do I have to feel bad about?" Harvey snapped immediately, and Kieli, who couldn't help getting her hopes up about his offer, let out a sigh of disappointment.

"You should be sorry."

"...I am." She ducked under his intense glare. Still, she did feel a little dejected and hung her head over the rail.

Darkness enveloped the ocean lying below her, and she couldn't make out the flowing waves. The bottom of the ship occasionally flipped up a lump of sand, though, sending up whitish puffs of sand smoke.

"Ready? One, two..."

She heard a voice call out from the stern and turned to look. The sailors were lowering the coffin into the sea by its wires. Kieli leaned forward from the rail and watched as the white casket slowly approached the surface.

When its bottom touched the sand, the wires went slack and the coffin was quietly released into the ocean. The crewmen lined up on the edge of the deck and offered silent prayers. During those few seconds, she felt as though even the sound of the screws got just a little bit quieter.

As the sailors watched, sand half buried the coffin as it rocked in the gentle waves, and it disappeared to the other side of the night sea. Even so, they all gazed mutely beyond the blackness through which they could see nothing.

Eventually, bit by bit, conversation started up again, and they began cleaning up.

"Let's go," Harvey said shortly, turning to leave, but Kieli didn't move from the rail, still contemplating in the direction the coffin had drifted.

"Where will it be carried?" she asked without turning around.

"She's not listening..." Harvey gave up and trusted his back to the rail again, pulling another cigarette out of its box with his mouth.

"Somewhere in the Sand Ocean, there's a place where anything drifting in it eventually ends up. The things there weather away little by little over decades and centuries; they become part of the sand, and flow off again to some other part of the planet's ocean. That's how the sand in this sea circulates."

“Huh, you’re well-informed. I’d never heard that before,” the radio chimed in, apparently impressed.

“I’ve never been there myself, of course. I think I might like to see it before I die,” Harvey muttered in a voice that somehow sounded like he had carefully erased the emotion from it as he lit his new cigarette. Kieli kept silently regarding the ocean as she gave ear to the subdued tone and slightly gravelly, low voice beside her. She thought about what “before I die” meant to an Undying and was sure it was an absurdly long time away. Or else maybe it meant that he would never ever go.

Below her, the night sea spread out as far as the eye could see, and the quiet sound of sliding granules never ceased reaching her ears.

The sea of flowing sand that enveloped more than half the planet’s surface was said to threaten the spread of life—but this sound, the gentle sound of sand stretching its hands out as far as it could to embrace everything on the planet, could have been one of the last kinds of music this world, with its scant nature remaining, could manage to play.

CHAPTER 4

FALL DOWN THE STAIRS TO WHERE I
AM



The Sand Mole's Seventh Son's fifth day at sea was an historic day in that, for the first time in decades, Harvey went without smoking. He didn't have any memories in recent years of doing something so admirable as to refrain from smoking when he wanted to smoke, so his behavior impressed even himself. By the time night rolled around, though, his hands naturally grew fidgety, and he would unconsciously light and extinguish his lighter.

"*You're getting on my nerves,*" a grumpy voice scolded him, so Harvey cursed under his breath, "*Leave me alone,*" and shoved the lighter into the pocket of his work pants.

"I'm bored..."

He uncrossed his legs and threw them in front of him, readjusting his position, then leaned against the wall and gazed out the round porthole. All he could see through the thick glass, filthy with sandy dust, was the never-ending blue-gray ocean and sky; even if he kept watching, in the end, he would still be bored.

The fourth division was moderately peaceful. It was just about dinnertime, so almost all of the passengers had cleared out to the cafeteria on the first-level deck, and he could only see a few people sleeping here and there. The low sound of the engine came up from the bottom of the ship and quietly filled the room.

As he looked at the window, more at the dirt on it than the scenery beyond it, the next thing Harvey knew, he was extracting his cigarettes and lighter again. He swore and shoved his hand back in his pocket, then stood up, immediately hitting his head on the ceiling, and swore again resentfully. The ceiling was low beyond reason, so he was sure to hit his head against it several times a day.

"*Hey. Where are you going?*" The radio's voice followed him as he ducked down and headed toward the exit.

"The main deck. I'm gonna have a smoke."

"*Stay with Kieli.*"

"You watch her for a while. It's not like there's anything I can do, and just staring at a sick person's face for twenty-four hours isn't gonna make her better." It took him an entire day to come to that realization.

"*That's not the problem, and you know it. You need to be more seriously concerned about her. Talking about being bored and all that*

garbage.”

“Hey, are you trying to say I’m not worried?”

The conversation started taking a rough turn as they grew increasingly irritated with each other, when a faint moan from the girl they were discussing shut both their mouths.

Atop her pillow, Kieli opened her eyes slightly.

“*You awake? How are you feeling?*” the radio by her pillow asked anxiously. Kieli simply answered, “Mm,” which didn’t really answer either question, and moving her head just a little and with great effort, she directed her eyes at Harvey. A lock of her hair slid limply onto her pallid cheek.

“Going somewhere...?”

“...No. Not really.” Having missed his chance get out, Harvey shook his head, his expression indeterminate. He sighed, sat down next to Kieli’s bed, and reached his hand out toward the hair on her cheek.

“Kieli, Kieli!” cried an out-of-place, cheerful voice; Harvey suddenly felt tired and pulled his hand away.

He turned to look at the door to their room and saw a smiling boy peering through it, out of breath. “Kieli, there’s chocolate pudding for dessert toda—” He started to say something that seemed extremely inconsequential, but then he sensed the mood around him and cut himself off as if surprised.

“What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

He took his shoes off and threw them aside by the door, then crawled into the room and made his way noisily toward them, ransacking the bedding the other passengers had strewn across the floor as he went. Not caring an ounce about the obstacle in his way, he didn’t hesitate to attempt climbing over Harvey’s lap. A nerve twitched in Harvey’s cheek, and he grabbed the boy by the scruff of his neck.

“Wah, what?!”

“Shut up. Pest.”

He tried to stand up, and as usual, he struck his head on the ceiling, swearing a third time as he dragged the boy to the door and threw him rudely into the hall. The boy got up immediately and glared at him in protest.

“What’s the matter with Kieli? I didn’t see her all morning; I was *wondering* if something was wrong.”

“She’s just seasick. Go away.”

"If it's so bad she's stuck in bed, then it's not 'just' seasick at all. What did you do to her?"

"What did *I* do? It's not *my* fault..." Harvey retorted, fed up with the groundless accusations, but he actually didn't believe what he was saying either and ended up looking away to escape. He did get the feeling this was a little severe for "just seasick."

Just then, his runaway gaze caught sight of someone. A man clad in an ivory jacket was walking toward them from the end of the hall.

"Just the man I wanted to see," beamed the captain of *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son* when he spotted Harvey. "I heard from the other passengers that your companion isn't feeling well."

"Yes..." Harvey didn't have a very good first impression of the man, so his response was a little less than enthusiastic.

The captain didn't seem to pay it any mind; he cast a glance at the ceiling and indicated a corner of the deck above them. "If you like, feel free to take her to the medical office. The beds there should be more comfortable."

"...Thanks. That's very kind of you." He couldn't think of a reason to refuse, so for now, Harvey just thanked the captain, but something felt a little off. Inwardly, he put up his defenses. Harvey had only spoken with him briefly under the stairs the day before, but the ship's commander was suspiciously more solicitous this time.

Glancing at Kieli, though, whom he could see sleeping on her bed inside the room, he figured, well, it would probably be much more comfortable than that poor excuse for a bunk, so for the time, he pushed his cynicism aside.

"It's kind of weird how fluffy it is..." Kieli said, burying her cheeks in the medical office's pillow and looking uncomfortable somehow, and Harvey started laughing in spite of himself. "You talk like a poor person." He stifled his laughter as he pulled a steel chair over and sat backward on it, leaning against the chair's back.

The medical office was a small room deep inside the first-level deck. A steel cabinet and bench were placed on one wall to make up a simple examination space, and on the opposite side were single beds that looked ten times more comfortable than the bunks in third class.

"Because...when I'm with you...it's more unusual...for me to

sleep in a real bed...," Kieli replied crossly, but maybe the mere effort of speech wore her out. She sounded like she was only managing words while exhaling, and it took some time before she finished her long sentence.

"Stop talking and sleep." Harvey felt winded just looking at her.

"Where's Juli?"

"The captain took him back to his room."

"I feel bad. He came to play with me..."

"I said stop talking and go to sleep. I wanna go smoke," he repeated a little more emphatically, and Kieli nodded reluctantly and pulled the blanket over herself. Just as he thought she was going to go to sleep, her eyes peered out through the folds of the blanket, and she looked up at him and asked, "Will you wait here until I'm asleep?"

"No. I'm leaving."

"Then I'll go right to sleep, so stay." She finally closed her eyes and buried her face in the blanket.

A medical officer had given her some medicine, and it was probably because of it that he heard her breath slow in slumber shortly after she stopped talking. Peaceful...was definitely not the word for her weak, irregular breathing. Her pallor was as bad as ever; her skin, which was white to begin with, was now even paler, and Harvey could almost make out her blood vessels.

"How is she? Is she sleeping?"

He said he was leaving, but Harvey rested his chin on the back of the chair for a while and was contemplating her sleeping face when the captain returned from delivering Julius to his special-class room. When he glanced at the ivory jacket standing in the door and nodded, the captain closed the door and approached him.

"What takes you two to South-hairo? Visiting relatives or friends, perhaps?"

"No, neither of us have any of those."

"Then you're traveling alone? And you have no relatives?"

"...What about it?" he answered brusquely, clearly unhappy with the captain's lack of hesitation in asking such personal questions. The captain stroked his chin and nodded; Harvey had no idea what he was nodding about. He hated the idea of being asked any more questions and quickly rose from his seat.

"Where are you going?"

"To smoke. I'll be right back."

Before he left the bed, he remembered to grab the radio next to Kieli's pillow by its cord. There was something he wanted to discuss outside. "No, no. Please take your time," the captain's abnormally gracious voice called after him as he walked through the office door.

There wasn't a soul on the first-level deck. The light from the cafeteria door a little way ahead had dimmed, but when he looked even farther, he could see the last passengers disappearing down the stairs as they finished their dinner and returned to their rooms. The radio dangling from his good hand, he started to walk in that direction at a stroll.

"That's not seasickness. It's probably caused by spirits or something." The radio beat him to saying that very thing.

"Yeah."

"Don't 'yeah' me. If you knew, then you shoulda hurried to do something about it."

"If I knew a way to do something about it, I would have done it already. Why is this *my* fault?" Harvey replied, scowling. First Julius, now the Corporal—did they think he didn't think about Kieli at all? (Although they probably said those things *because* they thought that.)

He had vaguely picked up on the presence of some deep, black manifestation, but when he focused on it and tried to identify what it was, he immediately lost the trail. It was something like a hazy, shapeless entity that blended like static with the engine noise and vibrations confined onboard, encircling the entire ship.

"I think she'll get better when we get to port and get her off the ship."

"We can't be so patient. We can't just leave her in that state for days. Ah, damn it, I can't stand to watch. I'm worried she might keep getting weaker and weaker until finally she dies..."

"It won't do any good talking like that. Just calm down."

"You're too damn calm. Taking it easy like that."

"I'm a patient guy; comes from life experience. If I weren't patient, I would have gone crazy and torn my heart out long ago." Even though he was the one saying it, the line disturbed him immensely the minute it slipped off his tongue, and he cursed in irritation. It would seem he wasn't *quite* calm enough to be telling other people to calm down.

“Argh. Anyway, just let me smoke,” he spat, half pleading, just as he came out of the hall and stepped onto the stairway.

As he placed his foot on the first step leading to the main deck, he happened to look down under the stairs. He could no longer see any passengers coming out of the cafeteria, and the abandoned stairway zigzagged downward. A brighter light leaked faintly from the bottom-most third-level deck, but that one corner had sunken into darkness, as if rejecting all light. It was near the spot where the captain stopped him the day before, at the stairway that led to the crew-only deck.

He felt a tug at his mind, and the instant he directed his attention that way—*What the...?*

Something like a chillingly cold tentacle crawled up his spine. Instinctively, he froze and braced himself, but by the time he tried to ascertain what it was, all signs of it had disappeared.

“Hey, did you feel that? What was it...?”

“Dunno...”

“Let’s go. I won’t let you tell me there’s nothing down there this time,” the radio said timidly, but somehow triumphantly.

“I’m not gonna say it,” he said, annoyed, and changed his direction from up the stairs to down.

His footsteps were strangely amplified as they echoed in the deserted stairway, and the distance to the third deck felt as if it must have been ten stories, but he actually only went down exactly two floors before arriving at the bottom. He went around the stairs without venturing into the corridor that led to the third-class rooms, and a dim light leaked from the work stairway that led to the lower level as it had the day before.

He didn’t have any particular reason to hesitate, so he wrapped the radio around his wrist and put a hand on the stairs’ rail. Holding on, he practically slid down the steep incline, descending onto the fourth-level deck.

Bags sandwiched the aisle on either side as it stretched into the darkness ahead. (He seemed to remember someone being told to stow things away yesterday, but from what he could see, it didn’t look like anything had been done at all.) There were probably fuel tanks on the other sides of each wall; a smell resembling oil hung thick in the air. He’d heard that giant fossil fuel tanks occupied most of the sandship’s lower levels, and the work corridors wove between them, stretching out like a maze.

"Is this where that strange presence came from?"

"No. I think it was farther down," Harvey muttered, looking down at the tips of his shoes.

"Farther down, he says," replied a bitter voice from the radio. It was right; he looked around, and there was no stairway leading any lower.

"I guess we'll check farther in..."

When he started to walk away from the stairs...

Help me...

An emotionless voice clung to the back of his neck. He hadn't heard it with his ears but rather seemed to perceive it around his spinal cord. The cry had an unpleasant air about it, like a feeler that had stuck to his backbone and wouldn't let go.

He shook the chills off, wiped all expression from his face, and turned to look behind him. An iron fence closed off the area behind the stairs he had just climbed down, and beyond it was just a wall—a dead end—but an iron door stood sunken silently in the darkness, almost one with the wall.

He could still feel the voice on his spine and thought it called to him, "This way."

"Herbie."

"...Yeah."

He used one hand to vault himself over the fence and approached the door. He touched the handle, licked his dry lips, and moved his hand.

As soon as he turned it a little, he heard the creaking sound of metal on metal.

Oof...

The noise of the engine was so loud that this new sound shouldn't have stood out, but even so, he started for a second and his hand stopped.

He checked again to make sure no one was in the corridor behind him, then strained his nerves as he turned the handle clockwise to three o'clock. He felt the lock give, and the door opened toward the other side. He pushed it wide enough for himself to pass and peered inside.

Not that he hadn't expected it, but inside the darkness was near

complete. Still, he had relatively good night vision, so after straining his eyes for a bit, he was gradually able to just make out the inside.

A steep, narrow staircase stretched into the darkness below. In reality, its incline was probably fifty or sixty degrees, but to Harvey it looked like a vertical descent; he would believe it if someone told him it wasn't a stairway, but a ladder.

He lightly placed his hand on the door and very carefully put his foot on the first step. The place he stepped creaked, and his sole trod on sand. The sand and rust had been left to build up; it didn't look as if the crew used this stairway every day.

"What do they use it for...?" Harvey wondered suspiciously, but for now it seemed as though it wouldn't have trouble supporting his weight, so he went down to the next step, keeping his hand on the wall, and started to head downward. The sound of metallic creaking and trodden sand echoed in the darkness, keeping time with his pace.

He didn't have to go far before the scent of sand in the air got stronger, and another smell, an irritating odor that pricked at his nose, drifted faintly toward him.

It had been decades, but *that smell* still remained firmly rooted in his memory—there was no doubt about it. It was the rotting stench of an abandoned human corpse.

He stopped automatically. He tried to go back up a step, but his heel gauged the height wrong, and he came dangerously close to slipping and falling before digging his nails in the wall. The sand at his feet wafted downward, making a dry, pattering sound. "*That was close! What are you doing?!*" the radio protested, just barely caught around his wrist.

"Sorry. I can't do this."

"*What? You can't?*"

"I don't want to go any lower." Harvey fixed his gaze on the darkness at his feet and searched with his heel for the step he'd just missed. He was clearly running away.

"*Look. You're not a baby. What are you afraid of now? How many decades have you lived?*"

"Say what you want. I don't want to..."

Just as he dragged his heel and went up a step, he felt a presence behind him.

The instant he turned around, something like a metal rod flew

into his line of vision. “What the—?!” Harvey took a powerful blow to the side of his head, and not a second later, a hard shoe kicked him in the shoulder, dropping him to the bottom of the stairs.

For the briefest moment, he could see work clothes, like the crew’s overalls, out of the corner of his eye. “Uwaah!” the man screamed, tossing aside the metal he’d grabbed and running up the stairs. “Th—” *That’s my line!* Harvey shouted inwardly, as he grabbed the handrail and tried to regain his posture, but apparently the rail had gotten brittle—his right prosthetic arm pulled it off with a devastating crunching sound. He failed to right himself and tumbled backward down the steep stairs. Partway down, the stairs themselves gave way and threw him into empty space.

Harvey couldn’t see a thing in the darkness; he had probably fallen more than ten meters...

Harvey struck the ground suddenly. He hadn’t managed to brace himself, and he heard a crack from somewhere around his neck—the sound of something clearly breaking.

But oddly enough, the first thing he worried about was where the radio had fallen.



I’m cold...

She was supposed to be asleep on the soft bed in the medical office, but Kieli felt like she was lying on the ground with her cheek on cold sand.

I’m cold. I can’t breathe. It hurts. Help me. The thoughts had been swirling around inside her clouded, misty mind for a while, but half of them were not things Kieli felt. Someone besides her was groaning in the core of her brain. She directed her consciousness there, wondering who was suffering, but it seemed it was no longer a single consciousness—more like an amalgamation of thoughts.

“Harvey...,” she said hoarsely as she exhaled, but there was no reply.

He said he was going to smoke a cigarette. Hurry back...

She lifted her cheek a bit from her pillow to look, but even the radio, who had watched over her this whole time, was missing. *The Corporal’s gone, too? What, did they both go off somewhere?*

“...Cap’n...” Kieli heard subdued voices from the opposite end of her bed. She turned her head and looked over the blanket covering her feet at the medical office door beyond. The captain in his ivory jacket was standing with his back to her facing a sailor in overalls in the hall who seemed to be appealing to him for something. A man with a narrow face and round glasses—she didn’t remember him addressing her in the engine area the previous day, but later she realized that she had met him before, at the port town. It was that sailor.

“I really don’t want to do this anymore. If we keep it up, I know they’ll...”

“Don’t talk nonsense, you spineless coward. You took care of the man, right?” The captain cut himself off and glanced back toward her. Out of reflex, Kieli pulled her face into the shadows of her blanket. “We can’t talk here. Come on.” The whispers moved away. She peered out of an opening in the blanket, and the last thing she saw was the captain’s back before he closed the medical office door.

The handle turned from the outside, and she heard it being locked.

...A lock?

After a pause, Kieli gasped and threw off her blanket. “Kuh...” She pulled herself up but got dizzy and slid off the bed; fortunately the room was small, and she managed to crawl along the floor to the door. She clung to the door to stand herself up and tried turning the knob, but it wouldn’t budge, as if it was welded in place.

“What’s going on...?” she murmured, stunned. That instant, the moaning voices she heard in her brain grew louder, as if coming through a megaphone, swelling to shouts so intense, she thought her head would burst from the inside.

“St...stop!”

Kieli cowered, holding her head. *It hurts! Help! I hate him!* Throngs of heartrending screams, male and female, howled inside her brain, and she couldn’t tell which thoughts were her own anymore.

It probably wasn’t Kieli who staggered to her feet, grabbed a steel chair with one hand, and banged it against the doorknob.



Regardless of the many hardships he'd endured, Harvey had come to terms with the fact that they were probably all payback he couldn't escape, and he never felt sorry for himself. But now, at this moment, he felt as if he wouldn't mind if somebody sympathized with him a little. Why should an innocent, good-hearted passenger on a ship be kicked to the bottom and left to die?

The one thing that might be considered a small consolation in the midst of this misfortune (although it wouldn't be anything nearing consolation to a normal person), was that sand had piled up where he fell and absorbed some of the shock, so he got off with only a few broken bones and was pretty much unharmed, relatively speaking. Had he crushed his skull on the hard ground or something like that, he wasn't confident that he would have lived. He definitely wouldn't have wanted anyone to see him.

Well, I don't have to worry about the broken ribs... What I do need to worry about is the collarbone and, uwah, my left arm, huh...?

Harvey surveyed his condition as he lay on the ground with his cheek in the sand. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see his broken collarbone sticking out of the skin on his right shoulder, and when he lifted his left hand to put it back in place, it dangled from his wrist at a strange angle. For the time being, he used the joint to force his collarbone back in place.

The damaged areas had already begun healing, but it looked as if he had no choice but to wait on the ground a while until he could move properly. He consciously blocked off the pain so all he felt was a throbbing, dull numbness, but that sensation, too, was extremely unpleasant, like beetles crawling all over his body.

"Corporal..."

Darkness enveloped his field of vision, but he could vaguely make out radio's lead-colored casing a little ahead of him. All that came out of the speaker was feeble, intermittent static; he heard no response. Harvey wanted to reach out and pull it to him, but it was just barely out of reach.

He gave up and looked around to inspect the rest of his field of vision. His cheek rubbed against the ground, making a small crunching sound by his ear.

He seemed to be in a relatively wide area; he could make out something that looked like blackish walls pretty far off, and an unreliable glow, just enough to let him see, reached him from a small emergency light. Maybe its connection was bad; the light

would suddenly go out, and then after a while, seep back in from the darkness, as if remembering it was supposed to be on.

The muffled sound of the fossil fuel engine filled the air around him. He was probably in one of the holds between the fuel tanks at the bottom of the ship.

In any case, figuring out where he was wasn't the problem.

The problem was figuring out where this rotting stench came from.

Harvey could see something whitish, like a bent stick, protruding from the pile of sand on the ground in front of him.

It was a woman's arm. It was oddly white and smooth. The surface of her skin had started to decay, like melting plastic.

Harvey shifted his gaze slowly, as if tracing the scene, and squinted at the dim floor beyond where similar objects lay, not entirely hidden, clotting the whole area. These things, looking like a collection of abstract sculptures standing above the sand, were the arms and legs of people who had started to rot or their already bleached bones.

There were easily more than ten bodies lying bent in a heap under the sand, pushing their limbs toward the ceiling, as if pleading for help.

Crap. By the time the warning sounded in a corner of his consciousness, Harvey had already recalled a certain scene from his memories, like a chain reaction, and it flashed before his eyes with abnormal clarity.

A battlefield in the wilderness where he'd taken refuge from Church Soldiers; mountains of corpses filled his vision, as if they went on to the ends of the earth. He had spent tens, hundreds of days staring at nothing but that scene. It attached itself forcibly to the core of his memory and blazed to life in his brain as if it were yesterday. Beetles scavenging bodies ate through the skin on the back of his hand, burrowing into his arm, and crawling all the way to his shoulder, devouring his flesh as they went, exiting via his collarbone.

Stop it. Don't remember that..., he said to himself, trying to sweep the thoughts from his head, but the image clung to his retinas against his will and refused to go away. After the bugs left, the ghosts of soldiers—one with a slit throat, one with his eye gouged out by a bullet—would crawl up to him, cling to his arms and back, and hatefully accuse him. *You killed me, Ephraim...*

It's not my fault, it wasn't me...

He shuddered as he felt something stick to his neck, and he looked to see the rotting woman's arm slither up out of the sand to strangle him.

"Uwah!"

He winced and tried to jump up, but now a man's arm held his shoulder down; yet another pushed his head into the sand. *Shff, shff...* Numbers of rotting corpses crawled out of the sand, wrapped themselves around his neck and body, and started to pull him into the ground.

Hey, calm down, stupid... He cursed at himself; crouched on the ground, held down by dead bodies and unable to move, he had no right to be talking to Kieli as though he was so much better than she was. *Corpses don't move. It's only their ghosts, coming after you because they want more friends. Ignore them and they'll give up and go away; don't get dragged down.*

You killed me..., one of the corpses said, taking on the face of a soldier.

No, they're not the same thing. Calm down, damn it! He knew it in his head, but he couldn't break free of the illusion in front of him. He cast a pleading gaze at the radio lying just within his field of vision and muttered, "Corporal..." in a voice that stuck in his throat; it was so hoarse it surprised even him. The radio really must have been broken—it made no sign of responding.

The ghost with the soldier's face pressed his head down with inhuman strength, trying to force him into the sand. *You killed me. You killed everyone. Everyone...* A low voice, almost like a buzz, cursed him over and over right in his eardrums.

Bam!

Suddenly, Harvey heard a crash, and sand flew up and obscured his vision. At the same time, a dull sound resounded in his body, and he almost cried out at the intense pain that pierced through a gap in his consciousness, but thanks to that pain, he revived from his mental paralysis.

The ghosts weighing on him vanished, as if blending into the billows of sand and dust.

...They disappeared...?

He couldn't immediately grasp what had just happened and looked around, dumbfounded.

Harvey's metallic right arm had punched the sandy ground with

its fist. The prosthesis acted independently of Harvey's will, mowing down the ghosts, and as it did, pain shot through the Undying's broken collarbone.

Of course he wasn't in the wilderness or on a battlefield; it was just a ship's hold littered with corpses, that was all (*all?*).

Still half in a daze, Harvey slowly sucked the breath he was unconsciously holding into his lungs.

"...Aahh..." With a deep, indescribable sigh, he felt his forehead hit the sand. He felt pain, as if his collarbone jumped out of place, but instead of blocking it off, he left it alone. He had the impression that he would be better able to maintain his sanity that way.

He didn't have the willpower to move, and he lay limp on the ground for a little while. His right arm moved on its own again, crawling over the sand, and timidly picked up his left hand where it had been dislocated—that instant, an intense pain shot up from his wrist to his shoulder. Come to think of it, his wrist was broken, too.

"Oww! Stupid, don't touch th..." Harvey stopped complaining midsentence, and blankly watched his right arm's actions. It was a little forceful, but his right hand straightened the left wrist that was twisted at an odd angle and held it tightly to keep it immobile. Of course, it wasn't acting at Harvey's behest; he had almost forgotten the arm since it had sublimated its consciousness and started working like his own limb the day before, but now it moved haltingly on its own.

Harvey swore, thinking selfishly, *If you're going to do it anyway, help me sooner!* Then he finally remembered what he'd threatened the previous day.

So it was staying faithful to the last minute to his threat never to move on its own again.

"Oh. Thanks..." he said, somewhat brusquely, to hide his embarrassment. His right arm maintained a tight grip on his left hand, as if protecting it, and didn't budge. "...You saved me. Thanks. I'm sorry..." he muttered again and, with a sigh, closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to the ground. *I'm pathetic*, he cursed at himself.

After a while, as he lay on his side not really listening to the low sound of the engine coming through the floor under his cheek, his bones and nerves connected enough for him to manage movement. He got up, supporting himself on his right arm, and

looked down at himself to assess the situation. His left wrist was still bad enough that it could easily break again with just a little force and wouldn't be of any use, but if he cut off the pain, then for now, it wouldn't get in the way of his escape.

He looked up at the ceiling he'd been kicked down from, but it looked pretty high. All he could make out was the consuming black darkness that looked as if it could descend on him any second. He surveyed the walls in all directions, but there was nothing he could use to hold on to. It seemed reckless just thinking about climbing up, so he ran his gaze around the inside of the hold, looking for another way out.

There was a hatch with a rectangular border on part of one of the side walls that appeared very slightly paler than the black around it. The hatch for loading and unloading cargo—it probably opened to the outside of the ship.

He stood up and stepped firmly on the sand for two, three steps.

So I can walk...

He seemed to be doing okay. He was still a little unsteady on his feet as he walked over to where the radio had fallen a little ways off. He picked it up by its cord and tried waving it up and down; he heard sand and parts sliding around inside.

Guess I'll have to take him apart... He sighed and, using only his right hand, took some time pulling the cord down over his head.

Then he dragged his feet (he tripped once over a body buried in the ground and almost fell) over to the hatch in the wall and, leaning against the door, placed his hand on the handle. There was no telling when it was last used; it was completely rusted over and stuck in place.

“...Can I leave this to you?” he asked his right arm, and a motor around its elbow let out a short buzz as if to give the affirmative. He was prepared for his collarbone to break again, but his right arm used only its own power, so skillfully that it didn't put any burden on his shoulder, and wrenched open the worn handle. Rust scraped off and fluttered down to his feet.

The lock came undone with a heavy *clank*, and an opening formed in the thick iron door. He pressed on it with his body, pushing it open.

“Oof...”

A sandy wind blew in, ruffling his hair; out of reflex, he ducked into the door's shadow to get out of the wind.

Shh...sshhh...

A low din of sand sliding against sand came through the door. He pulled himself away from the hold, drawn by the sound, and stepped on the hatch's doorsill. Sand flowed in gentle waves just beyond where his foot landed. Sometimes a slightly higher wave would come up, splitting at his toe, lapping around his shoe, only to merge again on the other side, and flow on.

He looked up to see the night sea, painted a deep blue-gray, and the night sky of the same color, spreading endlessly, uninterrupted, as far as he could see.



He became a sailor, oh, about six years ago; at the time, he would go out onto the main deck every evening after finishing his day's work, and even though he would have to get up early the next morning, he would stay up late, gazing at the night sea. Now he couldn't remember a shred of what it was he liked so much about this scenery that was so drably colored such a thick, dark blue-gray.

The crewman took off his round glasses and wiped his face, now thoroughly soggy with tears, with the sleeve of his work clothes.

"Sniff...Sniff..."

"Oh, cut it out already. How old are you? And you call yourself a man of the sea," spat the captain, standing next to him puffing his silver pipe. The smoke formed a thin line, and the cold night wind carried it off as it blew across the deck.

The sailor cast a hate-filled sideways glance at his boss and retorted in a tearful sob, "I didn't become a sailor to do this!"

"And I didn't become a ship captain to do it, either."

"Then let's stop already!"

"We don't have a choice. You know that now that we're involved, we can't pull out so easily." The captain twisted his lips, his pipe still between them, and said, glaring back at the crewman, "You know, you're always, always talking like that, and yet you're still on my ship."

"Well, I...!" He faltered; the officer had hit a sore spot. The captain blew smoke right in his face, and the sailor coughed

violently.

The captain had no right to say so, but that was exactly the case. His fellow sailors had washed their hands of the matter and left the ship one after another, but as for himself, he kept whining and crying about it. But he was still here. Well, he couldn't help it; no one wanted to lose his job and end up on the streets. The actual owner of *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son* was an import dealer whose main office was in South-hairo. Both he and his boss, the captain, were mere employees, and if they didn't want to get fired, they had no choice but to shut up and do the job they were given.

Only the captain and a part of the crew knew about it, but the imported goods the ship's owner dealt in sometimes included girls and children, and they were the ones responsible for obtaining those goods. The captain, the captain before him, and the captain before *him* all carried the work out indifferently, as though there was some kind of manual. They targeted tramps, women, and children who wouldn't cause any future problems, and dropped their companions in the ship's hold.

The sailor shivered, only partly because of the cold night wind.

"I just know they hate us. When I think about them turning into ghosts and crawling up from the bottom of the ship to curse us to death..."

"Ha! Ridiculous." The captain was clearly mocking the sailor, but over his jeers...

"...They actually did come haunt me," another voice suddenly interjected.

They looked around, but there was no sign of anyone other than the sailor and his captain on the main deck. "Wh-wh-wha...?" The sailor shuddered and retreated, but after half a step, his back hit the handrail. The deck ended there. On the other side of the rail was nothing but dark ocean.

A metal arm suddenly shot up from directly under the edge of the deck, and five metallic fingers grabbed the handrail with a *clank*. The crewman forgot even to scream, and just left his mouth gaping open as he sank to the floor. He was too scared to even hold himself up.

The metal arm was followed by one of flesh and blood. Instead of grabbing the rail, it used its elbow to haul up a body that was muttering, "Damn, it's hard not being able to use one hand..." This was without a doubt the one-armed, redheaded, third-class

passenger whose distinguishing feature was his surliness—the one the sailor thought he had just pushed down a stairway with his own hands (or more accurately, with the metal pipe he was brandishing). Supporting himself on his metal prosthetic arm, the passenger half slid onto the deck and, breathing as if soaked in fatigue, checked the cord of the radio hanging from his neck—that old, familiar radio that always seemed so valuable to him for some reason.

Its rusty casing dully reflected the light of the main deck. Copper-colored eyes caught it and emitted a somehow bottomless, eerie glow.

“Gh...gh-gh-gh-ghost...!” After wagging his chin a few times, the sailor finally got out the scream caught in his throat.

Maybe his feelings had been hurt. The man looked obviously unhappy. “This is your fault, you know. Who would act so superhuman because they *wanted* to?”

“I-I’m sorry, spare me...!”

“That may be enough for me, but an apology won’t cover it for the guys who died down there...,” he said in a low, threatening tone, taking a step forward. The crewman tried to run away but was so scared he couldn’t stand; he crawled backward on his hands, but one of them slipped; “Eep!” he cringed and closed his eyes tight. The footsteps came closer. There was no way he could gain forgiveness, but he opportunistically prayed to God to save him anyway.

But the footsteps passed right by the crewman and continued. A scream—“Gya!”—came from behind him, and he opened his eyes and turned nervously to see the captain, who had abandoned him and was trying to escape from the main deck (*That’s going too far, Boss!*), struggling as the grotesque false arm hoisted him by the collar.

“You haven’t done anything to Kieli, have you...?” A voice blew in the captain’s ear, with an air ten times more dangerous than before.

“She’s just sleeping in the medical office. I haven’t done anything!” the captain wailed, flailing his arms, and then, without warning, the door to the main deck slammed open, as if caught by a sudden gust of wind. But that door wasn’t light enough to be opened by the wind.

The captain and his attacker both swallowed and looked up; the

sailor, too, felt a foreboding presence and timidly turned to face it.

A small girl stood there, dull light illuminating her from behind as it bled through the doorway. She was wearing only a camisole and shorts, but she didn't seem to feel the cold as her arms hung limp at her sides. The crewman remembered that the captain had locked the door to the medical office, and a chill ran down his spine.

The girl held a twisted metal pipe—it looked as if it had been the leg of a desk—loosely in her hand.

As everyone stood frozen by the clearly abnormal sight, the girl slowly surveyed the main deck, stopping with the captain's face. Completely expressionless, she raised the metal pipe over her head with a force no one would have thought possible of her small build and suddenly swung it sideways.



What the...?

The next thing he realized, Harvey had been flung to the edge of the main deck, caught behind the captain. He gasped and clung to the nearby handrail. While he was at it, he grabbed the captain's arm right before he slid off the deck from the momentum. Maybe the impact from the pipe had broken the bone—the captain screamed, but Harvey wished he would have thanked him for automatically saving him. The pipe she had thrown made a shrill sound as it rolled off the main deck and disappeared into the black ocean.

Tap. A bare, white foot stood before him.

He looked up to see Kieli leering down at him, or probably more accurately, at the captain, an ominous light filling her eyes.

Oy...

He gulped, flinching despite himself. No matter how you looked at it, this wasn't normal.

While Harvey was distracted, the captain tried to crawl away on all fours, but Kieli grabbed his collar, and he let out a pathetic scream. The girl's slender arm dragged the captain up by his neck and began strangling him with a bizarre strength. "Gweh...!" A choked squeal came from the captain's throat, along with the sound

of creaking bones, but at the same time, Harvey heard a strange sound from Kieli's arm, too, as if it was snapping.

"Stop it, Kieli!"

Harvey had been watching Kieli's actions in dumb amazement, but that sound brought him back to his senses; he panicked and got between them. She'd gone beyond the limit of her own physical strength and was exerting an absurd amount of power. "Let go! Stop!" He grabbed her hands and peeled them off of the captain's neck, but she struggled against him with such inhuman strength that he couldn't oppose her without using every ounce of force he could muster, and an unpleasant snap came from inside his left wrist. He immediately suppressed the pain, but in that split second, she shoved him, forcing him to relinquish his grip.

As he tottered a few steps backward before regaining his balance, he saw Kieli stumble in the opposite direction, lean against the handrail behind her, and...

"Ah...!"

For just a second, he thought he saw the real Kieli looking shocked. The next instant, she flipped over the rail and disappeared beneath the main deck.

"Kieli!"

He jumped to the rail and leaned over to see a hole open up in the surface of the ocean far beneath. She was immediately swallowed by flowing sand and vanished.

The inside of his head went blank. His brain wasn't functioning, but he instinctively jumped over the rail and into the ocean below.

As waves of churning sediment battered him, he could no longer tell up from down but soon managed to get his face above the surface and looked around. He caught sight of the white face of the girl, almost buried in sand, then grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him just as her face sank completely below the surface.

"Heeey, grab hold!" came a shout diagonally above him. He looked up to see the sailor in glasses releasing a raft from the main deck. He reached out and caught the raft that fell, gliding through the air, and first pushed Kieli's limp upper body onto it. Supporting Kieli with his right arm, he dragged himself up with his left elbow, then checked to make sure that the radio was securely around his neck and sighed in relief.



“Aaahh!” The crewman let out a slow yell. At the same time, the wire that was supposed to connect the raft to the deck slid smoothly downward; it must not have been secure on the deck side.

“I-I’m sorry...!”

“You’re useless, damn you!” Harvey’s jeer was pointless. The sand carried the raft, now having lost its foundation, away from the ship in the blink of an eye, and the stupid look on the sailor’s face as he watched them go and the name *The Sand Mole’s Seventh Son* carved on the side of the ship disappeared beyond the darkness.



The solid blue-gray of the night sea and sky gradually lightened, taking on a sandy color. *The Sand Mole’s Seventh Son* was scheduled to be at sea for ten days, so that meant they ended up disembarking (falling) from the ship exactly halfway through the voyage.

Soon the morning of their sixth day at sea would be upon them.

Harvey wondered how many hours he’d been at it, but as he had nothing else to do, he remained perched at the edge of the raft, resting his cheek on his hands, propped up on his knees, and gazing at the bland scenery that spread before him.

“I’m bored...,” he muttered to himself, then dropped his chin limply onto his arms crossed on his lap. He’d have welcomed a bit of conversation, but of course the radio was broken at a time like this. He’d been doing his best to kill time rolling his lighter around in his hands, but that did nothing to ease the boredom. He’d dropped his cigarettes at some point, so his smoking ban continued after all.

Harvey felt it exceedingly odd to hear the words “I’m bored” coming from his own mouth. When he traveled, it was natural for him to go weeks without speaking to anyone, let alone one night. Talking to people was just annoying and depressing. Once, he might have been tempted to just leave himself to the sandy currents and see where the ocean finally deposited him—but now, of course, there was no way he could take her drifting with him on such a

stupid expedition.

He shifted his chin on his arms and looked down at the girl lying next to him. The profile of her small body, curled in sleep, looked so weak it made him uneasy. Her white cheeks looked even paler as they reflected the color of the predawn sky.

For a second, he involuntarily saw in her the rotting corpse of the woman he'd gotten tangled up with in the ship's hold.

Uwah...!

He knocked a fist against his forehead, hurriedly erasing the scene projecting itself in his brain. He kept pushing his fist into his forehead and sighed. *What am I thinking about? I'm really losing it...*

After a while, he half opened his eyes and glanced, somewhat nervously, back at the girl; he no longer saw the impossible (absolutely impossible) scene that haunted him a moment earlier.

"...Kieli, wake up already. Do you *enjoy* wearing on my nerves like this?" Harvey grew increasingly bitter and tried complaining, but of course he got no response. Thinking about it, he realized she hadn't even rolled over in her sleep for hours.

You're breathing, right...?

He suddenly wasn't so sure. He leaned over and put his face close to hers. After confirming that faint, but regular, breaths escaped her barely open lips, he heaved a sigh of relief for the time being, but her pitch-black eyelashes remained firmly shut, giving him the impression she might never open them again. "Hey, come on, wake up. I'm begging you..." *Please wake up*, he murmured under his breath and put his forehead on her cold cheek, feeling like he was praying.

Crunch, crunch, crunch...

Intermingled with the quiet sound of shifting sand, he heard the muffled thrum of screw propellers. He gasped and looked up, squinting into the distance of the now brightening ocean.

He vaguely made out a black shadow approaching on the other side of the morning mist.

A ship...Where's it from...?

It wasn't big enough to be a passenger ship; it seemed to be an old clipper model. He didn't see the world as being kind enough to let him innocently rejoice over being saved, so for the time being, he put up his guard and tried to determine the ship's nationality. As the vessel drew closer, the haze thinned, and he could clearly make out the name on its bow.

“Oh...” All his strength fled his body, he was so relieved.

A familiar name was engraved there: *Sandwalker*. He didn't know who'd heard his prayer, but it seemed that somewhere on this planet, a god felt like offering them a hand.

CHAPTER 5

TORI PERI



Tori Peri.

It seemed to be somebody's name. And, even more strange than the name, it seemed she was the one being called by it.

"Tori Peri, where are you? Come out here," a familiar voice was calling from somewhere. It was a low voice that rumbled in the throat a little, with a faint gravelly quality that felt nice on her ears. Attracted by the noise, she crawled out of the hole in the wall and meant to say, "Here I am!" but what came out of her mouth was more of a scraping "eek" sound.

"Oh, there you are. You do like small places, don't you?" The lighthearted voice and footsteps came closer, and the toes of work boots stood in front of her. She clung to the shoes with flat-clawed hands; the owner of the boots grabbed her by the back of the neck, and she floated up to his shoulder. She loved riding on his shoulder, so she buried her nose in his neck, stained with the smell of tobacco, and squeaked again.

"What? Are you hungry?"

But it seemed she couldn't really get through to the man, and his copper-colored eyes peered at her in exasperation. A little flustered at having his face so close that she could touch it, she squeaked, trying to say, "No, it's not that!" "All right, all right, don't rush me. I'll get something for you." He laughed, not getting it after all, but she was happy enough just to see him smile at her, so she felt like it was all right anyway.

...He's never smiled like that in front of me...

Envious of this "Tori Peri" someone in her dream, Kieli slowly woke up from her light doze.

She felt as though she'd been asleep for a very long time.

Before "Tori Peri," she kind of remembered being stuck in a long nightmare, but she couldn't really recall what it was about. Anyway, a painful, suffocating feeling had invaded her head, and she hadn't known what was what.

No. I'm scared...

When she tried to remember, she felt a sharp chill and shivered inside her blanket.

A low engine sound echoed from under the floor. Her bed wasn't soft, so Kieli thought she must have moved from the medical

office back to her third-class room, but she peered quietly out from her blanket and saw that she wasn't in the fourth division she'd gotten so used to.

A yellowish bulb hung from the ceiling, swinging slowly as it brought her surroundings to light. She was in a long, narrow space with round windows lining the walls on either side. With its simple bedding of stiff blankets and hard pillows cluttering the floor in a messiness completely estranged from organization or tidiness, it gave the impression of shared quarters kept by a group of men. Did *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son* have a room like this?

"Are you awake?" When she turned her head and lifted it a little, Kieli heard a hoarse voice beside her. She jumped up in surprise, taking the blanket with her, and was assaulted by pain in various parts of her body; her breath caught involuntarily for a second.

Kieli froze, still clutching the blanket to her chest, and the voice spoke again soothingly. "Oh, sorry for startling you. You don't have to get up if you're not feeling up to it."

"...No. I'm fine..."

She sat still for a bit and the pain subsided. She raised her face tentatively but couldn't see the speaker anywhere. *Huh...*?

Casting her gaze around the room and back, Kieli saw an old woman in an olive-brown overcoat beside her pillow. How long had she been there?

"Um, where am I...?" she asked, somewhat startled.

"The *Sandwalker*. You're our guests."

"*Sandwalker...*?"

She had thought in passing that she might be on a different boat, but apparently she really wasn't on *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son*. Before it even occurred to her to wonder when she'd changed ships, the nervous thought struck Kieli that maybe she'd been separated from Harvey.

"The boy is up above. If you can get up, come with me; we should put his mind at ease," the old woman said, as if reading her mind. She got up with a grunt and started to walk, dragging her feet laboriously. At one end of the long, narrow room, Kieli could see a ladder with galvanized metal steps.

She stared blankly at the back of the head of the old woman who called Harvey "the boy," but then put her blanket aside and stood up. "Wait. I can go with you."

.....? *What's going on...?*

When she moved, for some reason every joint in her body, especially in her arms, hurt excruciatingly.

But the seasickness that had pressed on her so heavily had disappeared, as if she'd imagined it, so she actually felt very good. When Kieli likened the pain in her arms to the time she was ordered to clean the archives and had to carry massive numbers of insanely thick books, it stopped bothering her so much, and she followed after the old woman with a bounce in her step.

"Honestly, that boy's face before he knew your condition was nothing to worry about...I've never seen him like that." As she walked, her small frame dragging her overcoat along, the old woman's throat made a chuckling sound, like she was savoring her laugh. "The boy really never does change; no matter how much time passes, he's still a stubborn little boy on the inside. Reminds me of Tori Peri..."

Kieli blinked, unable to determine if the old woman was talking to herself or to her, but after a pause, the last part of what she said caught her ear. "Ma'am, who's Tori Peri...?!" Kieli asked emphatically, addressing the old woman's back as she climbed the ladder.

But by then, the old woman had disappeared into the gloom overhead.

"Wear this. It's cold out." As she heard that last sentence, the overcoat the old woman had been wearing fluttered to Kieli's feet, as if its contents had suddenly vanished.

Slipping the borrowed overcoat over her camisole, Kieli, barefoot, climbed the cold metal ladder to the ceiling, where a door opened upward. She grabbed the lock lever and pushed the door open with both elbows. The instant a crack opened up, chilly outside air rushed in, but the thick overcoat blocked the cold. It was just as heavy and stiff as it looked, but she had no complaints about its functionality or warmth; it had a lot of pockets, and a fur-lined hood.

Just as she was about to put more energy into pushing it a little farther, the door's weight suddenly disappeared.

"Wah, oof...!"

The extra force almost catapulted her into the open. Kieli panicked and clung to the doorway. She lifted her face to see that a

man she didn't know had lifted the hatch from the other side.

She automatically fell speechless and froze. The man looked down at her in amusement.

"Hey, the little princess is awake," he called in a slightly accented drawl, looking over his shoulder. Cheers and laughter broke out behind him.

The hatch opened right onto the main deck. This ship seemed much smaller than *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son*, and she could see all the way from stem to stern just by the light of the lantern hanging from its support. Dark blue-gray clouds hung in the night sky spreading above her.

A big, cylindrical oil stove stood in the center of the deck, and about ten men sat in a circle around it. Apparently they were in the middle of a party and a card game; liquor bottles and tin tankards, along with cards and chips, lay scattered around the floor.

Kieli didn't know any of them, and they were all wearing similar, uncouth clothing, so she couldn't really tell any of them apart. She started getting nervous but then spotted an unmistakable copper-colored head mixed in with the crowd. She'd missed him for a second because he was wearing the same kind of coat over his shirt as the one Kieli had borrowed.

Just as she noticed him, Harvey turned. The second their eyes met, she thought some kind of emotion flickered in his usually stoic face, but as soon as the notion struck her, he suddenly turned away and lit a cigarette obliviously.

".....?"

Kieli got confused, wondering if she had done something to put him in a bad mood, when she heard, "What's the deal? You wouldn't leave her side until just a little while ago." The man above the door laughed then took her arm and pulled her up onto the deck. Chuckles rang out from the circle of sailors.

"Yeah, shut up. Don't put weird ideas in her head. Kieli"—Harvey interrupted the laughter around him with a grimace, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, and gestured—"Over here." He lightly patted the floor next to him with the back of his hand. A little nervously, Kieli joined the circle and sat down on Harvey's right. Warmth from the oil stove heated the deck's floor, and she found it surprisingly comfortable.

"Well, have a cup." A red-faced man diagonally across from her pushed a tankard over, but Harvey glared at him through narrowed

eyes. "Don't give her liquor!" The man winced and reluctantly withdrew his hand. "She can have this," offered another man, handing her a mug instead.

Kieli thanked him and accepted the cup. A bitter fragrance wafted up with the white steam from the liquid as she put it to her lips. It was coffee, so watered down that it had almost no flavor, but the moisture felt good on her dry throat and spread to the core of her body. Now that she thought about it, she'd been bedridden with seasickness for so long she didn't know how long it had been since she'd put anything decent in her mouth.

"How are you feeling?" Harvey asked shortly when she paused after savoring a few sips of the warm coffee.

"Mm, strangely, I feel completely fine now."

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

"My arms hurt a little, but it's fine."

"All right then," he responded curtly, taking a single breath, then looked down at the cards in his hand.

He held his cards in his left hand; Kieli noticed that his wrist was in a bandage with a splint and frowned. "What's wrong with your arm?"

"Nothing. If I'm not careful, it'll break again before it heals, that's all."

"Not that." *I'm asking why!* When she started, understandably, to complain, a guffaw burst from the man sitting on the other side of Harvey. He was in the prime of his life, with a fearless face, and had a little more personality than the others, but as he was moderately drunk, a goofy smile spread across his intimidating features.

"Oh come on, give her a decent explanation. She doesn't even know her own situation."

"It's a long story; I don't want to. And the guy in charge of explaining is broken," Harvey declared, not wanting to take the trouble. The radio was on the ground next to him, but from what Kieli could see, it looked like it had no power. Why was he broken? And what happened to *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son* with Julius on board? And when had they changed ships? Who were these people? What day was it? Why was Harvey hurt like that?

It was nothing new for Harvey not to explain anything to her satisfaction, but there were so many things that didn't make any sense that she started to get angry.

“Um, let me play, too, please.” Kieli addressed the man diagonally across from her who was dealing, and all the men in the circle looked up from their hands and stared at her, wide-eyed. “You? You can play?” the dealer asked somewhat derisively.

With every eye on her, Kieli faltered inwardly but stubbornly answered, “I know the basic rules. I watched some games the other day.”

“Hey, now. What are you thinking?” came the expected exasperated response from beside her. Kieli glared sideways at him and, deliberately lowering her voice, declared, “I have an idea.” Harvey likewise looked sideways at her and frowned questioningly.

“An idea?”

“Play me. If I win, then you explain everything to me yourself without sounding annoyed. You tell me everything that happened starting with the last thing I remember.”

“I wondered what you were getting at...,” Harvey murmured with a sigh, adding under his breath, “She’s not still possessed, is she?”

“Possessed?” Kieli repeated, not understanding his meaning, when the man with personality from before slapped the knees crossed in front of him and started to belly laugh.

“Okay, okay, I allow it! Give her some chips!” he said loudly to the dealer, then laughed even harder. “You’re an interesting little girl. I’d never’ve thought a girl could talk to an Undying like that!”

“I don’t see anything interesting about it. You must be starved for entertainment from being out at sea for so long,” Harvey retorted, frowning in annoyance at the man who kept slapping his knees, clearly enjoying himself. The conversation was so completely natural that, for a second, Kieli missed the most important part. After thinking something along the lines of, “Do they know each other?” she realized the word “Undying” had casually fallen from the seaman’s mouth, and she was flabbergasted.

The words wouldn’t come immediately, so she questioned Harvey with her eyes. He seemed irked as he let out a smoky sigh.

“Okay, okay. *If* you win. I’ll tell you about that, too.”

“You really will. You promised.”

“Fine. There’s no way you’re gonna win anyway,” he said smoothly. Kieli, still staring at Harvey, was left speechless, and after a pause, she took great offense.

Kieli demonstrated surprising talent at the sailors' card game and thoroughly defeated all of the men in the circle, including Harvey, gathering all the chips to herself. Their leader clung to her, weeping, "For heaven's sake, just don't take the ship!"...But such a wonderful scene, of course, never actually came to pass. Not that she expected anything like that.

She thought she'd learned the types of cards and what went into each hand watching at the gambling house at the port, but when she actually played, she learned that what was important in a game was not collecting the right cards. Rather, most of the game had nothing to do with the cards in her hand but feeling out the other players. The sailors of the *Sandwalker* were good bargainers, but Harvey outstripped them all. At any rate, he never gave the slightest hint as to what was in his hand.

As she picked up the cards that slid to her across the deck, Kieli stole a glance at Harvey's profile next to her. Did he have that sleepy look on his face that seemed to say he didn't have any interest in this little game when he had a strong hand or a weak one? She tried to sound him out, but she had no clue. His attitude was aloof when he quickly collected the five cards for the strongest hand in the federation army suit, but there were also times when everyone sensed a strange confidence from him that made them all fold despite his pitiful hand. He mystified all the sailors, to say nothing of Kieli.

While she tried to read his expression, her intention to "steal a glance" turned into "staring at him," so Harvey noticed and looked sidelong at her. His cigarette hung from his mouth as a malicious smile crept across his lips.

"Give up?"

"Not yet," she shot back, looking pointedly away from him. Instead, the man sitting to Kieli's right groaned and threw his cards down.

"I give up. I'm out of chips."

It was the sailor who first helped Kieli onto the deck. She was sure he said his name was Ka Rif. He wasn't the only one; most of the names of the *Sandwalker's* sailors sounded like they were from a language unfamiliar to Kieli, and their skin was darker than Kieli's or Harvey's. They were a race of people she never saw in Easterbury; it was possible they were from a land somewhere far across the continent.

"It's your turn, little lady," Ka Rif told her, and she hurriedly looked down at the four cards she'd been dealt.

The house rules on the *Sandwalker* were a little different from the ones she'd learned at the port city. They still competed with the strength of the five cards in their hands, but instead of all five cards being dealt facedown, one of their cards was dealt faceup so that everyone could see it. The strategy required that she be able to reason out her opponents' hands from the single cards that she could see and compare them with her own.

The card facing in front of Kieli's lap was the judge of the federation army. Among the four cards in her hand, she held the judge with the free city mark.

A pair of judges, huh...? she murmured inwardly, careful not to let it show on her face. The judge was the card with the distinction of being the strongest of the thirteen types of cards, and if she had a pair of them, she could say at this point that she had a fairly superior hand.

"Call. Fifty," she declared, using a word she'd just picked up, putting five chips worth ten apiece in the circle. That meant she was staying in the game, betting only as much as the person who went before her. If she didn't have enough chips to call or if she didn't think she had a very good hand, she would "fold" instead and sit out that round. As she started to understand how it worked, it was pretty fun to play.

Beside her, Harvey muttered, "Hmm," expressionlessly, but she couldn't tell if that "hmm" meant he was calm or concerned. Or it might have just been to throw her off. His faceup card was a shepherd. Like the judge, it was one of the five cards that made up the strongest hand, but in any other scenario, it would actually decrease the value of the other cards; it was an extremely difficult card to handle.

"I raise. A hundred fifty," Harvey casually declared regardless, tripling the wager and unceremoniously tossing fifteen chips forward. "Erk!" gulped the man next to him whose turn it now was. He may have accidentally given away his hand. If she remembered correctly, his name was Ol Han, and he was the man with the scary face who talked to Harvey like they were so close. The *Sandwalker* didn't really have a "captain," but he was sort of the leader who took charge of the other sailors.

"Damn it, I call. A hundred fifty, right?" Ol Han grabbed some

chips carelessly and flung them forward, then play continued in order of the next player's turn.

When the bet went over one fifty, people started folding left and right. When it came time for the final wager after exchanging cards, Kieli, Harvey, and Ol Han were the only three left.

What'll I do...? Kieli looked down at her hand and considered. She had four judges. Not bad—or rather, very good. She glanced at her opponents. Harvey was cool as always, and in contrast, Ol Han looked very unsettled as they both exhaled puffs of smoke.

If I lose here, it's over... She could no longer depend on the chips in her hand. The wager had gone up to four hundred. She could fold and wait for another chance, but she had such good cards...

She decided. "Call. Four hundr—" she began.

Just then, something tugged at her back. She turned around, but no one was behind her.

She sensed a presence and dropped her eyes down to see a brownish *something* crouched in the sleeve of her coat, as if it was hiding. Judging from its appearance and size, it seemed like a wadded, beat-up overcoat—she couldn't come up with just the right word to describe the short, fat creature.

Wah, what is that...?

She reflexively pulled away in surprise, but when she saw it look up at her with small, round eyes stuck to either side of (what looked like) its face and shake (what looked like) its head, she somehow understood what it was trying to tell her.

"You call, little lady?"

"Yes. No."

At Ol Han's prompting, she looked up, and after peeking at the side of Harvey's face, which, as usual, never betrayed a sliver of what he was thinking, she hesitated for just a second then declared, "I fold." Harvey looked up with just a hint of surprise. Immediately thereafter, he erased his expression. "I raise. All of it," he murmured, shoving his remaining chips forward.

"Guess I got no choice. I bet everything, too." Ol Han bet the same amount, and it turned into a final showdown between the two of them. The other sailors, who were all drinking together as spectators now, fell silent, awaiting the outcome.

When Harvey nonchalantly revealed his hand, everyone, including Kieli, gasped in disbelief.

All five of his cards were shepherds.

“He’s an idiot,” someone muttered, astonished.

According to the complex and strange rules of this card game, having a shepherd card lowered the value of all the other cards in a hand; collecting shepherds was as good as suicide—but the one exception was braving that danger to get a shepherd in all five suits. Five shepherds had the power to completely turn around the power of all hands, reversing each of the values. In other words, no hand existed that could beat five shepherds.

As soon as Harvey had convinced everyone that he had won, he swore and hurled his five shepherds carelessly to the center.

“What the hell? That was dirty.”

“Ha-ha! Say what you want.” Ol Han laughed heartily at Harvey, who frowned unhappily, and revealed his own hand so that Kieli and the other gawkers could see. Kieli and the sailors leaned forward to look at it.

He had the four strongest cards—the judge, the sword, the revolution, and the bishop’s staff—of the white temple suit, but his last card was meaningless—the exile. Basically, he didn’t have a hand.

The sailors around her saw it and burst out laughing, and a little later, Kieli, too, figured out what had happened. There was *no hand* that could beat five shepherds, but looking at it the other way, after the turnaround caused by the five shepherds, the one hand with even greater power than the shepherds would be no hand at all.

“Who bets everything on a bluff? You’re an idiot.”

“Ha-ha. Just keep talking, sore loser. You’re good, but you’ve never been careful enough in the final stage.”

“Oh, shut up. Damn, you destroyed me.”

Ol Han cheerfully gathered the mountain of chips to himself, while Harvey looked away and puffed at his cigarette, clearly not amused. Watching their exchange, Kieli started laughing in spite of herself. It was unusual for Harvey to show ordinary emotions like this.

“Are you really upset?” she asked, holding back her giggles.

Harvey looked sideways at her and scowled. “Of course I am. I was playing to win.”

“Now, you promised. Explain everything to the little lady,” Ol Han interjected. Not grasping the situation for a minute, Kieli blinked, then remembered the “bet” she herself had completely

forgotten. While Harvey ended up losing everything to Ol Han in the last hand, Kieli folded before it ended, so while she didn't have many, she did still have chips left. That meant that Kieli had beaten Harvey in their little game.

Oh yeah...!

It was thanks to that brown creature who told her. She dropped her gaze and looked around, but even after turning over the sleeve of her overcoat, the old rag of an animal was nowhere to be seen.

"Kieli?" Kieli looked up at the questioning voice to see Harvey exchanging glances with the man on the other side of her, clearly wondering what she was doing. She turned her head, and there was the young sailor who had first left an impression on her, Ka Rif, offering her a silver-colored pot.

"Oh. Thank you."

She held up the mug still sitting beside her, and he poured her some more coffee. White steam rose from the pot's spout, and a warm liquid filled her cup. As the warmth gradually reached her hands, she realized that she was frozen down to her fingertips. They may have been sitting around a stove, but they were still outside in the winter.

"I wish we could give you some chocolate or something, but this is all we have; sorry. Only men live here, so aside from this, all we have is booze."

"What about that old lady?" she asked, reacting to the "only men" part of what he said, but Ka Rif blinked in surprise. "Old lady?"

"There's no old lady here. Oh, I guess there was one about ten years ago, but she got sick and retired before I came on board."

"But she was just with me down below."

"Kieli, that's enough." A frank voice stopped her, and she cut herself off and turned questioningly to her left. She looked up at Harvey's face, devoid of emotion, and realized what he meant. Now that she thought about it, the old lady was supposed to have gone onto the deck a little ahead of Kieli, but she hadn't seen her once since then. "Ka Rif, booze!"

"Coming right up!" At Ol Han's summons, Ka Rif stood up, ending the conversation.

The card game broke up and turned into a bout of drinking; the men's lively laughter filled the deck.

"So you met the old lady?" Harvey muttered his question,

casually considering the smoke rising from the cigarette in his mouth. Kieli nodded, and he sighed in exasperation. "I saw her, too, and got an earful. Something about, 'I thought you'd grown up some, but you're the same as ever. Why should I have to keep worrying about you even after I'm dead?' Like I give a damn." Even as he complained, something like a bitter smile showed very faintly on his profile; his copper-colored eyes might have been recalling pictures of days gone by, days Kieli knew nothing about, in the smoke.

"Before I know it, even she's dead. I don't remember how many years ago I last saw her..." Harvey started to talk; maybe he was going to keep his promise and explain everything. But his husky voice seemed pained somehow, and it pricked at Kieli's heart.

She unconsciously bit her lip and waited for him to go on; Harvey suddenly turned to face her and let out a little laugh. He reached his splinted left hand toward her and lightly pulled Kieli's head closer. "Stupid. It's not as serious as all that. There's just one thing I kind of regret is all."



Of everything she heard after that, what shocked Kieli the most was that more than one religion existed in the world.

On this planet, if someone said "the Church," they couldn't possibly have meant anything but *that* Church, but apparently on the mother planet that the Saints came from long, long ago, there were all kinds of other churches. They each worshipped different gods, preached different doctrines, and taught different histories about the creation of the world. In reality, no matter how she thought about it, Kieli could not fathom how differing creation stories could coexist, so how in the world could they have established such contradictory societies on the Saints' planet?

While she racked her brain to imagine what such a world would be like, Harvey looked at her with an exasperated expression that said, "I didn't worry so much about other people."

On this planet, there is only one Church.

But in places a lot of people didn't know about, there were people, though on a small scale, who believed in religions other

than the Church. One such group was these members of the *Sandwalker*. The *Sandwalker* was the name of their boat, but it was also the name of their religion. There was a time they had quite a few believers, but the Church found them and exerted pressure on them; they dispersed after the death of their founder, and only one practice remained as almost the sole doctrine that connected the believers—the practice of laying their dead to rest.

They didn't bury them in the earth like the Church did; they consigned the bodies of their dead to the Sand Ocean. It was this boat's job to make sure that corpses arrived safely and securely at the spot where everything drifting at sea eventually ended up—the Sand Ocean Graveyard—by transporting the coffins they collected at the various secret ports to a point near the graveyard.

It wasn't necessarily a case of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," but maybe it was a matter of course that believers of a heretical faith suppressed by the Church and an Undying being chased by the Church would develop a friendly relationship; apparently there was a time before when Harvey had stayed on this ship. It was decades ago, when Ol Han's predecessor was alive and the old woman, who was the predecessor's younger sister, was still full of energy, caring for the ship full of seamen.

Harvey spoke only a little at a time, then interrupted himself, put his cigarette to his lips, and started up again after a little while, so it wasn't until the empty can that sat in front of Harvey in lieu of an ashtray was full of cigarette butts that Kieli managed to hear that much. But all she knew was who these people were and why they knew that Harvey was an Undying. They hadn't yet gotten to the important part—what had happened on *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son*.

The excitement of the drinking party had already passed its climax, and a sleepy atmosphere started drifting in amidst the bouts of laughter, which gradually grew fewer and further between. The pale blue light of the lantern gently illuminated the deck from above, and the orange flame that flickered in the oil stove wrapped its surroundings in a faint warmth.

"The dead return to the sand, and eventually become life again."

"What's that?" Kieli asked blankly in response to the cryptic words that suddenly flowed out of Harvey's mouth.

Gazing as usual at the smoke from his cigarette, Harvey said, "I

told you a little about it before, remember? Everything that drifts to the end of the ocean dries up and erodes there, becomes sand, then drifts out to sea again. Over time, the bodies of Sandwalkers become part of the sand like everything else. 'The dead return to the sand, and eventually become life again.' I'm not interested in these guys' doctrine, but I don't hate that saying."

"...Hmm. It is a pretty expression..."

It was pretty, but Kieli thought it somehow sad. She clutched her knees wrapped in the overcoat, rested her cheek against them, and glanced over at Harvey sitting next to her. He probably didn't realize it himself, but Harvey said things sometimes that sounded like he longed for death. It frustrated her that, when it happened, she fell silent, unable to say anything that might help.

"Hey, you guys," came a slow, slurring voice, along with a thick arm that wrapped itself around Harvey's neck. A thoroughly drunk Ol Han leaned on Harvey and put his chin on Harvey's shoulder. "You're heavy. And you reek of booze," Harvey spat in annoyance, pushing the man's red face away.

"I been watchin' you, and you two've been buildin' up a depressing little world for a while now. Put more oomph into it and have a good time. We're having a party to send off the dead!

"That's right, oomph! None of you have enough energy!" Ol Han suddenly started yelling at everyone around him. Kieli looked and saw that almost all the men were already lying around the stove, snoring. Still telling his shipmates off for their lack of energy, Ol Han sat down where he was and crossed his legs, but maybe he too was half losing the battle against sleep. He started pouring himself a drink with a dangerously unsteady hand.

Kieli watched him, a little startled, and quietly asked Harvey, "Send off the dead? What does he mean?"

"They're going to send the coffins piled up in the ship's hold out to sea tomorrow. They're goofing off before that," Harvey answered with a sigh, looking in exasperation at his hammered old friend. "Hmm." Kieli let it go at first, but after a moment, she threw a terrified glance down at her feet.

"There are bodies piled up?"

"I told you this boat carries coffins, didn't I? It's like a funeral ship," he snapped in a tone that said, "I didn't want to talk about it to begin with; don't make me repeat myself," and Kieli winced. She had been listening, but her imagination hadn't yet absorbed the fact

that there were actually piles of dead bodies on this ship right now. "...The old lady's coffin is down below, too." Harvey knocked the deck with his fist, wearing a wry smile that mixed with some other complicated emotion.

"Harvey! Hey, join me!" Ol Han wailed in his still-slurring voice; apparently it didn't take long for him to decide that drinking felt empty, and he dragged himself toward them with one hand. He pushed a tankard full to overflowing with an amber-colored liquid into Harvey's hand. "Come on, drink. It's not like you can't drink."

"I don't get drunk, so it's no fun. You're lucky, getting to enjoy yourself," Harvey responded with narrowed eyes as he reluctantly accepted the tankard. Without a moment's delay, Ol Han clinked his own tankard against Harvey's and made a toast by himself. The amber liquid sloshed out and spilled onto the deck and Harvey's overcoat. "Look, you," Harvey complained, but Ol Han laughed it off with an, "Oh, don't worry about it!" and drained his tankard in one go.

Harvey sighed and carelessly tilted his own tankard.

Looks like they're having fun...

Kieli let out a giggle as she watched the two. Feeling a little jealous inside, she brought her cup of now completely cold coffee to her mouth when—*Huh...?*

She realized that the scene around her was different somehow than it had been mere moments ago.

The rusty oil stove had become a sparkling silver, like it was brand-new, and before she knew it, the sailors curled up around it, as if competing for space, had changed a little. The older sailors had gotten younger, and instead of the relatively young sailors like Ka Rif, different sailors in the prime of life lay sleeping in their places.

She ran her gaze over the whole deck and saw that the floor, which had been patched up in places with galvanized planks, and the lantern's support, which had been leaning slightly, were all clean and new.

"Harve..." Gaping, Kieli turned her head to the side, then broke off involuntarily and opened her eyes wide.

Ol Han, sitting next to Harvey, had completely changed in appearance. He looked maybe about Harvey's age, and instead of his weathered demeanor, he had a young and innocent smile. Still, his outspoken attitude wasn't much different as he forced more beer into the reluctant Harvey's tankard.

In this scene where time had apparently turned backward, the one thing unchanged was Harvey, sitting there looking the same as he did now; what *was* different was that there was a brown object resembling a wadded-up, tattered cloth sitting on his lap. It curled up its body, looking enviously comfortable as it occupied the entire space between Harvey's thighs as he sat cross-legged.

It was the creature that had appeared for just a second during the card game!

"Ah...!"

That instant, the scene began changing again at a dizzying pace. This time, it jumped rapidly forward. Ol Han and the other sailors grew old before her eyes. The oil stove aged and rusted over, the lantern's support leaned, holes opened up in the floor, and though no one was there, they automatically patched over with galvanized planks.

The world started spinning; Kieli closed her eyes automatically, and when she opened them again, the scenery around her had returned to the present.

Ka Rif and the sailors snored by the stove as they had before, and Ol Han, though drunk, had gone back to being the leader with personality, in the autumn of his life. Maybe Harvey hadn't seen the mysterious scene she'd just witnessed; he didn't seem disconcerted as he continued to humor Ol Han and reluctantly tip his tankard. The round creature in his lap was gone.

Why did only I...?

Kieli looked around in dumb amazement, her glance stopping in a dim corner of the deck.

The old woman in the overcoat was sitting there snugly. The same old woman who'd been next to her when she woke up; the old woman who was now a corpse sleeping in the ship's hold.

"Did you show that to me, ma'am...?" Kieli asked in a low voice.

The old woman nodded, and her lips, buried in wrinkles, twisted into a wry smile. "I want you to find *Tori Peri*. She's been waiting for that boy all this time, and now that he's here, she shuts herself away. So frustrating..."

A hoarse voice lingered in Kieli's ears as the shape of the old woman disappeared, seeping into the darkness—the next thing she knew, there was just a pile of sandbags sitting there.

*I want you to find *Tori Peri*...*

Kieli turned the old woman's last line over in her head for a while, then abandoned her cup and stood up. She sensed Harvey looking up at her questioningly and casually reassured him. "It's nothing. I'll be right back. Don't forget that you've only told me half of what's going on." Harvey scowled—no doubt thinking, "So I *am* gonna have to tell her about that, too."

Kieli went down inside the ship through the hatch and felt the cold metal against her bare feet as she descended the ladder on tiptoe.

With its lack of fire or people, the cabin, lit only dimly by a yellow lightbulb, felt even colder than the area on deck around the stove. Just like when she first awoke, simple bedding lay scattered across the floor.

Where was that hole...?

As she looked around, she remembered the dream she'd had right before she woke up, comparing that scene to the oblong room. In the very back, there was a hatch like the one on deck. When she considered that it probably led to the ship's hold below, where all the bodies were, Kieli naturally felt a little chill and started feeling anxious at being alone in the gloomy cabin.

There was a crack in the wall next to the hatch roughly wide enough for a cat to pass through.

Kieli, for no particular reason, tried not to make a sound as she stepped over the crumpled blankets and drew closer. She got down on all fours and stuck her face up to the wall. On the other side of the opening was a small space where scraps of cloth and cotton that looked like they'd come from a torn-up down coat were piled up thick and warm, forming something like a bed.

"Heeey...Tori Peri, are you there...?" she called in a whisper and waited a bit, but there was no sign of anything reacting.

She pushed her face through the crack and *caaarefully* reached out one hand to pick up a scrap of bedding. That instant, the dust that had built up heavily on top of it fell off all at once and danced up, filling the small space. It hit Kieli right in the face as she inhaled, and she panicked and jumped away from the wall.

Cough, cough...!

She sank to the floor and choked. She didn't know how long the space had been abandoned, but she didn't think there would be so much dust. It must have been years, or decades...

Then a small shadow entered the corner of her vision, watching her from a corner of the cabin. She turned suddenly, but the shadow jumped up in surprise and retreated into the wall, so she couldn't catch a clear view of what it looked like.

Ngh, it got away...

Kieli coughed once and steadied her breathing, then crawled along the wall to where she saw the shadow disappear.

A crack, a size smaller than the opening she was just investigating, sank into the darkness; if she hadn't known anything was there, she would no doubt have missed it.

She got down low and put her cheek to the floor to look inside the crack; as she expected, cotton and scraps of cloth were spread out like a bed in the small space. As she squinted inside in search of the bed's owner, wondering in exasperation how many homes the creature had, she noticed places where things like pieces of paper stuck out from the worn-out scraps.

What are those? Cards...?

She reached into the hole like she did before, being careful not to stir up dust this time, and carefully pulled a piece out. Maybe it had eroded; half of it turned into ash and crumbled away, and the other half only just barely managed to remain in her hand.

On one side, there was a streamline pattern drawn in blue ink; on the other, there was a silver crest and a single human being. Not only had the color faded completely, but part of it was torn off, so she couldn't make out the whole picture. However, it was a picture she had seen before, so she could fill in the missing pieces and reconstruct the picture in her head.

An emaciated man bound in chains and standing in the wilderness—its silver trade color put it in the federation army suite of cards; it was the exile.

She looked and saw there were several other picture cards from the game buried inside the bed. They seemed to be considerably old, and a lot of the ink had come off, but she could make out parts of a bishop's staff, a shepherd, and others.

Did Tori Peri bring these here...?

Why would Tori Peri gather up cards? Kieli wondered, returning her gaze to the scrap of the exile in her hand. When she did, she was hit by the strange sensation that the prisoner in the picture was trying to talk to her.

"What...?" In her surprise, she stared intently at the card. But of

course there was no way that a person in a picture could talk, and the exile stood hanging his head, chained up in the wilderness, as before.

Did I imagine it...?

The minute she relaxed, the memories that someone had etched into the card came flowing into her brain, as if replaying a recorded image.

Tori Peri.

Someone was calling. Kieli vaguely understood that she was the one being called.

“Tori Peri. Come out here.”

It was a low, gravelly voice, speaking in the brusque tone he used when he was in a bit of a bad mood. Kieli ducked inside her bed of scrap cloth. The cards she hid under her tummy brushed together and made a rustling noise.

“Stop your stupid pranks and give them back. Where are you?”

The tall owner of the voice crouched down and peered in at her big bed next to the trapdoor. But she wasn’t over there. “Kieli” had beds all over the *Sandwalker* (it was the boat’s fault for being in such bad shape; she could find lots of cracks that she wanted to sleep in), and even that tall man had no way of knowing all of them. The bed she was in now was one she had made just recently, and no one would have learned about it yet.

“Harvey, we’re sending the boat out soon,” called another man, coming down from the deck.

“Yeah, I’m coming.” The tall man lifted his face from the crack in the wall and turned to the other.

“Tori Peri’s not coming out?”

“I don’t know what she’s thinking. She pulled some cards out and ran off with them,” he spat, an air of annoyance lacing his words.

“Oh, those cards. Our last leader left them to you? You *were* his best student, after all. With that much beaten into you, you won’t have trouble making a living your whole life,” the other man said with a vulgar laugh. It was the man who had become the ship’s new leader in place of the last one, who had just died.

“My whole life? How long will that be?” he murmured and turned on his heel. “Oh well. Let’s go.”

“You sure? This is her way of sulking and trying to keep you

here.”

“It’s fine. Leave her.”

“You’ll probably never see her again. If we’re lucky, we might see each other again, but sand moles don’t live as long as people.”

“Doesn’t matter. If she won’t come out, there’s nothing I can do.” He kept responding in short sentences and stepped onto the ladder, leaving his companion, who smiled wryly. “You’re so stubborn.” *What?! He’s leaving?!* Kieli panicked and pulled together the cards under her belly, then crawled out of her bed with them.

Her hands and feet, with their flat claws, may have been good at shoveling sand, but in any other place, they slipped and slid, and were nothing but inconvenient. Even so, she struggled with all her might on her short arms and legs, but by the time she had crawled out of the crack in the wall, both of them had already disappeared through the trapdoor above the ladder and onto the deck.

He’s gone... Was he really mad...?

The cards she held in her clumsy hands scattered onto the floor.

She wasn’t really trying to hide them; she was going to give them back as soon as he found her. She just wanted him to let her ride on his shoulder, smile at her with his pretty copper-colored eyes, and rub his cheek against her one more time before they said good-bye, and then she would have been satisfied.

She carefully gathered the cards with her claws and picked them back up. Someday, she would give them back, no matter what. She didn’t know when that would be, but she was sure he would visit this ship again—even if she herself was no longer alive—because his life was probably much, much longer.

I hope he’s not still mad when he does...

When Kieli returned to herself, not surprisingly, she was in front of the small crack in the wall, gazing down at the exile card in her hand. The cheek she had pressed against the floor was thoroughly frozen.

“...Tori Peri. Come on out. It’s okay.” She quietly addressed the other side of the crack. She waited a little, and inside the bedding, where there had been nothing up to now, the brown creature that looked like a wad of old clothes gradually become visible, as if it had been buried there the whole time. It was short and fat, with spatula-like claws on its little arms and legs.

The ghost of the small sand mole looked timidly up at her with

its round, dark brown eyes.

“Let’s go give the cards back. I’ll go with you.”

Tori Peri hopped up from the bed but then burrowed back inside and shook its head. Kieli gave a small laugh.

“Harvey’s not mad. He’s not the kind of person who would stay mad about something like that forever.”

She reached a hand under the belly of the cowering Tori Peri and slowly pulled out the other cards. They would crumble if she handled them with the slightest roughness, so she took them out very gingerly, one at a time. They were very eroded, but it looked as though they were all thirteen cards of the federation army suit.

She carefully closed her hands around the thirteen cards and stood up.

“Now come on. Or I’ll leave you behind.”

Tori Peri crawled out from the bed but, still very nervous, got only her head out of the wall, then hesitated. Kieli breathed a light sigh, turned on her heels, and started to walk off.

“I don’t care. I’ll get all the praise myself,” she threatened jokingly, glancing back as she walked. Tori Peri, who was starting to crawl slowly out from the crack, jumped up in surprise and hid again. Apparently it was better not to look back at her.

When she turned forward again and set foot on the ladder that led to the deck, wind and a dull light from outside leaked in from overhead. She raised her face and suddenly locked eyes with a figure who had opened the hatch and was about to come down into the cabin.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, right. Nothing,” Kieli answered vaguely; the sudden appearance of the person she was about to go see caught her off guard. She stepped aside to give him room, and Harvey slid down the ladder. “Aren’t you cold?” he muttered in such a tone that she couldn’t figure out whether he was exasperated with her or being considerate as he ran his eyes around the chilly cabin.

“Where’s that man?”

“Finally fell asleep. He’s a bad drunk, but he holds his liquor; what a pain.” It seemed he wasn’t actually as bothered as he said he was, and there was dry laugh in his voice, as if to say, “Ah well.” Then Harvey’s eyes fixated on the pieces of paper that might as well have been scrap, and he gave her a questioning look. “What’s that?”

“Do you remember these?”

Kieli held out her closed hands and carefully opened them up to show him.

She waited a few seconds like that but got no reaction. As she realized, a little late, that far from still being mad it was possible he'd completely forgotten about it, she started to feel uneasy and turned her eyes upward to look at him.

"Harvey...?"

Harvey stood frozen in place, looking down at what was in her hands, all expression erased from his face.

"Where did you get...?" The instant he started to talk, he cut himself off again, as if suppressing some emotion, and covered his mouth with one hand.

"You remember?" she asked again, and after a pause, he nodded.

"I remember. Of course I do..."

"You're not mad anymore, right?"

"...About what?" he asked in reply, and a second later, made a face as though it occurred to him. "Oh..." Pressing his face, he sighed as if squeezing the breath out. For all the worry the other party had borne over everything, Harvey didn't seem to be holding any kind of a grudge. It exasperated Kieli just a little bit; he must have always been like that.

"She's been wanting to give them back all this time," she said, dropping her gaze to the cards.

"...Let me see them." Harvey held his left hand out in front of her, somewhat hesitantly. Kieli lifted her hands above his and transferred the scraps of cards into his palm.

The thin prisoner on the exile card that lay on top gazed up at them with quiet, downcast eyes. A faint breeze blew in from the trapdoor above them—that instant, the thirteen cards in Harvey's hand crumbled and fell between his fingers like fine sand.

When the yellowed bits of paper danced to the floor and settled there, suddenly, a small, shabby creature stood hunched in their center.

Without a word, Harvey dropped to his knees and crouched in front of it.

"Tori Peri..."

He spoke in a murmur. The ghost of the sand mole opened its round, dark brown eyes and lifted its head slightly.

"You kept these all this time?"

Tori Peri nodded. “Oh.” Harvey buried his head in his arms, resting on his knees, and heaved a deep sigh. The pieces of cards piled up on the floor danced in his breath.

“I’m sorry for keeping you waiting for so long. I’m sorry...”

Tori Peri shook her head slightly, but several times. She moved her arms and legs clumsily, crawling to Harvey’s toes; she clung to his shoe and closed her eyes happily.



“Man, so many depressing things.” Kieli never expected to hear such a phrase from Harvey’s mouth, so after staring at him briefly, she almost started to laugh, then ducked her head when he glared at her.

“Look, you. While you were off being happily possessed by vengeful spirits, I went through one painful experience after another. First I get punched, then kicked down a ladder, severely injured, and on top of that, all these corpses come at me...”

Maybe he felt with all his heart that that last part was an especially bad experience; Harvey broke off there and leaned against the deck rail with a look of disgust on his face. Apparently Harvey went through a series of harrowing circumstances from the time Kieli went to bed on *The Sand Mole’s Seventh Son* until she woke up on this ship, and it seemed that that was why he was not in the best of moods and didn’t want to talk about what happened.



She was finally able to get the story out of him shortly before (but he didn't fill her in on the specifics of his encounter with the corpses), and the pieces of memories she had here and there finally came together, though hazily.

She just barely remembered up to the point where the screams, agony, and hatred of all those people flooded into her head—trying to remember still made her head ache a little, and a chill ran down her spine.

"It's not like I was 'happily' being possessed, you know..."

"That was pretty intense. To be honest, you even scared me."

"I'm not glad to hear it," Kieli replied, sulking, and leaned like Harvey against the rail, flinging her arms out toward the ocean. She wondered if she would ever go back to *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son*. She got the feeling that the people sleeping in its hold needed a proper burial.

The dark azure sea and sky began to take on a faint brightness. Dawn was near.

Kieli and Harvey were the only ones out on deck; the engines had been shut off, and only their whispers echoed above the now-quiet ship. Only tankards and cards lay scattered around the oil stove, as if the men that were there until a short while ago had suddenly vanished.

Voices reached them from below, mixing with the sound of the sand waves. Kieli leaned over the rail and looked down at the belly of the boat; a hatch opened near the sand's surface, and sailors started pushing out several long, narrow boxes, a few men to each one.

One after another, the white coffins were pushed out to sea and left the boat, riding the flowing sand.

Rocking atop the still dark ocean as they drifted away, the groups of coffins sometimes sparkled white, reflecting the pale morning sunlight that had just barely begun to shine, and it even seemed as if they were saying good-bye to the two onlookers as they watched the caskets being offloaded from the ship.

The old woman was sitting on the last coffin to be released through the hatch. Beside her crouched a brown sand mole, its round eyes turned toward them.

"Bye-bye, Tori Peri...", Kieli whispered, giving a small wave of

her hand. She glanced sideways, and Harvey was resting his chin on his arms, crossed on top of the rail, seeing the coffin off as she did. His copper-colored eyes were fixed in their usual downcast inscrutability, and he watched without even blinking as the coffin grew more and more distant.

Thank you. Thank you for bringing the boy and Tori Peri back together...

A hoarse voice suddenly echoed in her head. On top of the coffin that was now just a speck in the distance, the old woman's ghost looked Kieli's way.

Kieli answered with a smile and shook her head; the old woman returned the smile and went a little farther. In a slow, quiet tone that seemed to spread throughout her, she heard:

You really are the girl from back then...

It can't be a coincidence that you've come to this ocean; a power must be working to draw you together...

"Eh? What...?" Kieli spoke aloud in surprise, but by then, the coffin carrying the woman and the sand mole had disappeared beyond the faintly hanging morning mist with the other coffins.

"What was the old lady talking about...?" Harvey asked curiously; apparently he'd heard the same voice.

"I don't know." Kieli just shook her head—he could ask, but there was no way she could answer—and returned her attention to the surface of the ocean where she could no longer make out a single coffin.

As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but sand, mist, and sky, all the same color—the usual ocean scenery spreading out before them.

After that, they fell silent, and the two of them gazed, wordlessly, far off into the ocean until the sky brightened a bit.

"...Do you remember?" About the time the morning mist had thinned and they could clearly make out the flow of the sand, Harvey opened his mouth in a whisper. "...Tadai's dad. The first guy to take care of me."

"Yeah, the one at the clinic." Kieli turned and nodded, thinking

it strange that he would suddenly start talking about the past. He was the father of the old man who lived in the clinic by the transfer station; the kind-looking man who, she was told, picked Harvey up off of the battlefield.

“When the last leader here died, it reminded me of when the old man died; I just couldn’t really take it anymore and decided to leave the ship,” Harvey continued as if talking to himself, his chin still on his arms, and his eyes fixed forward, looking at nothing in particular.

“It was right when the Church Soldiers had gotten wind of me, and there was going to be trouble. I didn’t have time to worry about Tori Peri. I never imagined she’d have been worried about that this whole time...”

“But you saw each other again. Right?”

“Yeah...”

He nodded, then muttered something under his breath. Kieli blinked in surprise. He said quickly, “It’s nothing. I didn’t say anything,” and looked away.

Kieli watched Harvey’s profile for a time as he scowled at the ocean. She sneaked a smile. She kind of knew what he’d said....*I’m glad you were here.*

She imitated Harvey, resting her chin on her hands over the rail, and closed her eyes for a while, lending an ear to the sound of the gently sliding sands.

“When I die, I want to be sent out to sea, too...” The words casually slipped out of her mouth. When she opened her eyes, as expected, Harvey was glowering at her.

“Sorry. I just wanted to say it.”

“Don’t say it again.”

“Yeah.” She shrugged and nodded, but thought inwardly, *It’s not like I was completely joking.*

It wouldn’t happen for a long, long time; she figured if things went their normal course, it wouldn’t be for decades. But when she did die, someday, she hoped she could have a burial at sea by people like the ones here. She would be reborn as part of the sand at the Sand Ocean Graveyard, and then she’d be able to follow Harvey forever, wherever he went.

An ocean of sand, a sand-colored sky, a sandy wind—sand enveloped this wasted planet; it was always there, wherever anyone was.

CHAPTER 6

WHITE WAKE ON THE SAND



When she asked Harvey if he could put it back the way it was after doing all that, he tilted his head, wearing a somewhat dubious expression, as if the problem had only just occurred to him, although Kieli didn't *think* that was the case.

"...You can't put him back together?" she asked again, lowering her voice.

"It's your fault for not asking before I got this far." Harvey shifted the blame to her, frowning with his cigarette in his mouth.

He had completely disassembled the radio. Its casing, screws, and parts of the base lay scattered across the deck. Harvey appeared to have organized them according to some kind of system, but to Kieli, it just looked like a bunch of clutter.

It was all well and good that he took it thoroughly apart and scraped out the fine sand that had gotten inside the circuitry, but now that he was at the stage of putting everything back together, she felt a twinge of anxiety and asked, just in case.

And that was the reaction she got.

She shot a suspicious glare at him; and Harvey, twirling the screwdriver between the middle and index fingers of his left hand (for some reason he had this uselessly dextrous skill), said casually, "Well, I'll figure it out." She had no idea what he was basing that on.

"You say things really flippantly like that, but what happens to the Corporal if you can't fix it?"

"I'm telling you, it's fine. Trust me," he replied, furrowing his brow in annoyance, and passed the screwdriver from his left hand to his metal-framed right hand. The long, bony fingers that she felt were surprisingly like Harvey's old right hand twirled the screwdriver the same way his left hand did, skillfully adjusting their position, and started screwing a coiled part onto the base.

Kieli knelt beside him and stared blankly at the hand for a little while as it worked. Before, it never moved the way he wanted it to, and Harvey was always fighting with it. It would seem, though, that during Kieli's lapse, they'd reached some sort of mutual understanding.

"Since when are you such good friends?"

"A lot happened."

From the look of mild disgust on his face, she imagined it probably had something to do with the part where he was “attacked by corpses” on *The Sand Mole’s Seventh Son*. This was the face he made anytime she tried to probe him further on the subject.

With that, Harvey focused intently on the task of rebuilding the radio, as if refusing to be interrupted, and Kieli, with nothing else to do, held her knees and turned toward the oil stove. Maybe it was running low on fuel; the slender, bluish flame that showed through its small window wavered forlornly.

It was a little past noon, and the low noise of the engine and the gentle sound of waves of flowing sediment filled the deck of the *Sandwalker*, sandwiched between the blurry, tawny colors of the sky and sea. The quiet rattling she heard near Harvey’s hands echoed faintly and comfortably in her ears.

Their early-morning work of “sending off the dead” ended, the sailors of the *Sandwalker*, starting with Ol Han, retreated through the hatch to their quarters and went to sleep in earnest. Apparently every afternoon following a send-off was like this, and Harvey told her that they probably wouldn’t wake up until the sun went down. They’d stayed up late partying the night before, then gotten up early in the morning to send out the coffins, so it couldn’t be helped.

Aside from Kieli and Harvey sitting in front of the stove, there was just one sailor left standing watch in the steering room near the stern, and every few hours, a sailor would mount the ladder, suppressing yawns, to take his shift.

She happened to look over at the window of the steering room in front of her, and her eyes met those of the man on watch, who, for some reason, was staring fixedly in their direction instead of ahead of the ship.

She blinked and looked back at him; he panicked and did a quick about-face. *What was that...?* She unconsciously turned to Harvey, but he didn’t seem to have noticed anything in particular as he directed his full attention to the work in his hands.

Hey, just now...

“Just now,” Harvey suddenly said exactly what she was about to say, and Kieli glared at his profile, her mouth half-open. She closed her mouth and waited for him to continue.

Harvey, still looking down at his work, said, “I was thinking. Where were you before your parents died?” He asked in a tone so

casual he could have been talking about the weather, so Kieli blinked a few times, unable to catch his meaning.

“Where? Easterbury. In an apartment on the corner of Twelfth Street, on the third floor.”

“Before that. Not the woman who raised you—I’m talking about your birth parents.”

“I was born and raised in Easterbury.” She inwardly added, “I think.” She didn’t have anything to base that on; she just couldn’t remember being anywhere but Easterbury. But apparently Harvey wasn’t really all that interested, and he acquiesced with a “Well, okay then.”

“The old lady said something that caught my attention, so I wondered, is all,” was all he said before falling silent again and returning his focus to the radio.

Kieli held her knees and buried her chin between them, then went back to studying the flickering fire in the stove.

You really are the girl from back then...

The old woman’s parting words floated into Kieli’s mind. *What did it mean? When was “back then”? Was it before her grandmother died?* She reflected on it but had no clue.

Her grandmother died the spring right after Kieli turned eight. While the people from the complex came to their apartment and started talking amongst themselves about the funeral and how to deal with her things, Kieli stood in the center of the bedroom, looking down at her grandmother’s dead body lying on the simple bed. *Is there no one to take her in? Does she have any other relatives?* She could hear the landlord and everyone talking behind her.

Don’t you know anything about your mother or someone? the landlord’s wife asked her, and Kieli pointed at the remains of her grandmother. The landlady shook her head in dismay. *She’s not your mother. That’s not what I meant. What a troublesome girl.* As the eight-year-old Kieli thought, *If I’m that much trouble, you don’t have to force yourself to take care of me; you could just leave me alone*, she could see someone else superimposed over her grandmother’s body. Her grandmother’s hair, which had always been tied up so properly, was down now, and her long white locks lay on top of her pillow, like flowing water. The young Kieli thought she’d seen something

like this before, somebody's body laid out like this...

"Kieli." Harvey's voice brought her back to herself. She turned her head to look, and Harvey, still looking down at his work, said shortly, "Sorry. That was a weird thing to ask." Kieli stared blankly at him, and he looked grumpily at her. "Is it weird for me to apologize?"

"No," Kieli said immediately, shaking her head and looking away.

Her cheeks, resting on her kneecaps, spontaneously slackened, and she grinned to herself for a bit.

Apparently it was time for the watchmen to change shifts. The hatch opened with a rusty creak, and the face of a man in a dark brown overcoat appeared. It was Ka Rif. It was afternoon, but he shivered in the winter cold and turned up his coat collar as he nodded lightly in her direction and went into the steering room.

After exchanging a few words with the watchman inside, his expression changed, and he immediately flew back out.

"Ol Han, come here!" He pushed his head through the portal to the quarters below and called for his leader in a voice that, while not loud, was somewhat tense. Kieli turned questioningly to Harvey. Harvey only shook his head, perplexed, and said, "Hold this. Stay here."

He shoved the half-built radio into her hands without giving her a chance to argue, then leaned on her to stand up. He met Ol Han, who had just emerged from the hatch, and started conversing with Ka Rif and the sailor in the steering room.

After a short while, Ka Rif disappeared alone below-deck, and the other three walked toward the end of the ship, whispering about something.

I wonder what's wrong...

Kieli considered the remaining parts scattered on the deck and hesitated for a second, then, thinking she'd probably be in trouble later if he'd lined them up according to some system, she gathered them together with both hands and shoved them into the pocket of her overcoat.

Holding the radio (it looked like a radio, but the casing was just kind of pasted together and the reconstruction of the inside was nowhere near finished), she stood up, and when she did...

The deck under her feet suddenly lurched to one side.

"Wah!"

Still clutching the radio in both arms, she stumbled forward and tottered. Ahead of her was the oil stove, filled only with embers, but still plenty hot. Just as she was about to fall on top of the cylindrical stove as if trying to embrace it...

“Oof!”

...a metallic arm grabbed her from behind. She heard a sizzle as something burned.

As Harvey pulled Kieli to him with his right arm, his left hand caught the teetering oil stove. “It’s usually the other way around. *You* do this...,” he complained, narrowing his eyes at his right arm as he dropped Kieli with a thud and peeled his left hand unceremoniously off the searing metal plating; the skin of his palm came right off.

“I-I’m sorry...Oh no! Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Yeah, it hurts,” he admitted honestly for once as she clung to his arm in shock, and he made a face as if he was really in pain. Closing his eyes in concentration for a second, though, he immediately regained his composure. “I’m fine now.” Harvey fixed his attention on the end of the deck as if nothing had happened. Ol Han and the watchman were leaning over the rail, examining the ocean below.

The sand-colored sky, which should have been relatively bright, was suddenly thick with clouds, and a dense gas covered the ocean’s surface, obscuring visibility. Sometimes they rode up on high waves and swayed heavily to the sides.

“Well?” Harvey asked shortly, and Ol Han turned a grim face toward him.

“We really are being carried off course. It’s weird; the sand currents in this part of the ocean aren’t supposed to flow this way at this time of year.”

“Why do you even *have* a guy awake to keep watch?”

“I wasn’t really keeping watch on the *ocean*...,” the sailor retorted, a bitter look on his face in response to Harvey’s comment, but he swallowed his words before he finished. Kieli imitated Harvey, and they furrowed their brows in unison. If they weren’t watching the ocean, what *were* they watching?

They heard a clamor of voices below-deck. Apparently Ka Rif had woken everyone up, and the men who’d retreated to the cabin climbed up, one after another, yawning. Just then, the boat rocked rather violently, and a few men who hadn’t found their balance

staggered and tumbled over. Ka Rif, the last to show his face through the hatch, raised a voice in protest as he was almost crushed.

Kieli held on to Harvey, so she didn't fall over this time; but Harvey ordered, "You go down below," and coldly shook her off his arm, shoving her toward the hatch.

"I don't want you falling over. Sit somewhere against a wall."

"Yeah..." Kieli had already caused him trouble once, so she couldn't object. Nodding reluctantly, she left Harvey's side. As she walked, she hung the cord of the husk of a radio around her neck.

".....?"

Vaguely sensing something, Kieli stopped where she was. She turned to look at the edge of the deck and squinted at the ocean beyond the rail.

She saw a faint shadow approaching through the opaque, sand-colored gas.

A ship...?

All of a sudden, a giant mass of iron appeared directly in front of them. Just as it sprang before Kieli's eyes, some of the sailors raised cries of terror.

The violent dash and shock of metal striking metal pierced the deck, and the whole boat dipped at an angle that dwarfed the jolt from earlier—she could almost say it was vertical. Everyone screamed as they slid, forced across the deck, and clung, panicking, to the deck rail.

Kieli slid with them, or rather, she fell to the edge of the deck; but unlike the adults, she had a small frame that was her undoing. Instead of being caught by the rail, her body slipped right through.

"Kieli, your hand!"

She heard a voice overhead, and before she could even think, her reflexes took over and she thrust out a hand. The radio swung to her back and the cord caught around her throat. The cylindrical stove rolled toward them, crashed into the rail, bounced with a clang, and brushed past Kieli's side as it fell to the ocean beneath her feet.

Kieli watched with a chill as the stove was swallowed up by the sand, disappearing in the blink of an eye; then she looked up to see Harvey reaching through the railing and grabbing her wrist.

"Crap...!" she heard him mutter; at the same time, her field of vision lurched perpendicularly downward. Blood marks in the shape

of Harvey's fingers stained her wrist. It was his left hand, the one he'd just burned—the instant the thought hit her, Kieli's wrist slipped through his hand. Their fingers brushed against each other, ultimately separating.

In the nick of time, someone else's hand shot out above her and grabbed her wrist again.

Ol Han was holding his hand out beside Harvey. He pulled with such force that she felt he might pull her arm off, and Harvey's prosthetic arm immediately jumped in to help, grabbing her side to hoist her up. She slipped back through the rail just as she'd fallen.

"That was scary..." She sighed, relieved, clinging to Harvey's neck.

"That's my line. I really panicked..." a sigh echoed by her ear. By the time she looked up, though, Harvey's attention was already focused elsewhere. He regarded the man who'd aided them, Ol Han.

"You were a big help. Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Ol Han's broad shoulders gave a light shrug as he leaned against the slanting rail at an unnatural angle. He went on to survey the scene to confirm the safety of his shipmates. "Is everyone all right? No one fell, did they?"

Though somewhat dazed, the men around them raised scattered voices to report that they were all right.

The ship's body was still tilting at a steep angle, and they'd all been pushed against the rail in a strange array of poses. From a distance, they might have painted an odd picture, like laundry hanging out to dry. Harvey's right arm gripped Kieli in a way that made it look as though she'd pushed him against the rail. Looking down past his shoulder, through the hazy, sand-colored gas, Kieli could make out the flowing sand swirling in a vortex.

"We've crashed..." Ol Han muttered, cursing, then shouted to the top of the leaning deck, "Ka Rif, can you see the other side?"

Kieli twisted her neck to follow Ol Han's bellow, and there was Ka Rif, clinging to the hatch in the middle of the deck, the only one to avoid the disaster. "Just a second," he shouted back; then he gathered his strength and kicked off the door, rushing upward.

Grabbing the opposite rail, he dangled from it as he peered over the other side of the ship's belly, which wasn't visible from their vantage.

"Wah. Whoa, a ghost ship...!" Hearing Ka Rif's outrageous report, the rest of the sailors stuck at the bottom frowned as if to

say, "What is that idiot talking about?"

Ghost ship...?

Kieli wondered for a bit as she took in the curt reactions on either side of her, and finally she looked up at Harvey's face. His copper-colored eyes narrowed in a glare.

"You got your hopes up just now, didn't you...?"

The Sand Mole's Birthplace. The chipped letters engraved on the side of the ship revealed its name. Danger always accompanied voyages, and apparently sailors setting out on them liked to adopt the name of the lucky sand mole for their vessels.

It was an old ship. The deck's supports split in half. Large holes pockmarked the floor in places as if someone had stepped through it, and there was no trace of the glass that had shattered from the windows on the bridge. The rusty ship took on the color of the twilight sky, becoming a copper that closely resembled Harvey's hair; it rested quietly, like ruins buried in the sand for no one knew how long.

Kieli heard a disappointed voice grouse, *It's just an abandoned ship.* Even the sailors that had mocked the notion of a ghost ship could easily accept an abandoned ship. They said all kinds of things drifted around the ocean near the sands' final destination—corpses, oversized garbage abandoned at sea, wrecked ships, and most likely the memories of the people who sailed them.

Kieli stood in a corner of *The Sand Mole's Birthplace's* deck and, unable to help with anything in particular, watched the others as they worked.

The *Sandwalker* had collided with the derelict ship buried in the sand, and its hold lay atop the drifter's bow. With Ol Han at their center, the sailors gazed at their own ship's belly from the drifter's deck, assessing the damage. A wire ladder had been dropped from the still-slanting *Sandwalker's* deck, and for the time being, they had all evacuated to *The Sand Mole's Birthplace.*

Examining the backs of the sailors' heads, Kieli's eyes ran from one end to the other. When she got to the last, she blurted, "Huh...?" The copper-colored head she thought was among them was nowhere to be seen.

Where did he go...?

Looking around, she found that the head she had been looking for had wandered through a door (so to speak; the door itself was long gone, and this was just a maw opening into a gloomy hole)

positioned near the middle of the deck; it probably led inside the ship. Harvey's tall frame crouched slightly and emerged from the doorless opening; he walked toward her casually, his hands thrust into the pockets of his overcoat.

"You were looking inside?" Kieli ran a few paces forward, stopping when she met up with him. "I wanted to go, too." In all honesty, she had no small desire to check it out herself and sneaked a glance past him.

Harvey gingerly stepped to the side, blocking her view.

"You don't need to go in there."

"Is something there?"

"Nothing. It's all falling apart."

Kieli sensed a subtle carelessness in his usually controlled voice and fixed a questioning stare at him. Exactly three seconds later, Harvey dropped her gaze as if trying to escape. He heaved a short sigh and said, "It makes me sick. Being in a place where lots of people got killed..."

"...Killed...?"

He murmured so quietly that Kieli hardly made it out, but that one word clearly stuck in her ears. Harvey grimaced and cursed, as if divulging something he hadn't intended.

"There were bullet holes in places. They must have been attacked by something, and then just abandoned."

"Something?"

Somewhere in her subconscious, she'd expected an immediate reaction like, "Hell if I know," but just as Harvey started to open his mouth, he hesitated, closing it with a peculiar expression on his face.

"...Well, hell if I know," came the line she expected, after a pause.

"Hey, look for something we can use as a lever. A plank, anything. We're all gonna push." Ol Han's order flew at them, and a few men scattered to find tools. They were probably planning to do something about the *Sandwalker's* grounded hull. Ol Han gave a few more quick instructions to his men, then suddenly turned his attention to them.

He had no expression. None at all.

.....?

Kieli felt something was off, but suddenly, Ol Han's usual carefree smile returned to his fearless face, and he called to them

brightly, "Harvey, if you're not doing anything, give us a hand."

"I'm injured."

Harvey took his left hand out of his pocket and waved it at him. Ol Han looked jokingly exasperated and replied, "It's already closed up. We're taking you to port, so do a little work."

"...Aye-aye, sir," Harvey answered with a wry smile and started toward him as Kieli wavered about whether or not to talk to him about what had just happened.

"Harvey," she addressed his back after opening and closing her mouth a few times, and just then...

Kieli.

Someone called her name. It sounded like a girl's voice in a lovely soprano. The instant she turned, she saw—only for a second, but without a doubt—a small shadow disappear behind a support. She panicked and faced Harvey. "Did you see that? Something—"

"You stay there. Don't go anywhere you shouldn't," Harvey ordered, stopping and turning for a second before she had a chance to say anything. Kieli shut her mouth, a little peeved that Harvey's attitude contained not a sliver of consideration for anything she had to say.

Kieli.

The small, high voice called again. It was followed by cheerful giggles. She'd heard them before. She couldn't remember when or where, but they definitely tugged at the back of her memory.

She tossed another glance at Harvey, who seemed to have dismissed her. He was standing and discussing something with Ol Han as they contemplated the *Sandwalker's* grounded hull towering above them.

As long as she was still in Harvey's line of sight, it would probably be fine. As long she stayed on the deck.

She formulated excuses for herself, and tiptoed toward the support where the small shadow had hidden. She walked around the column, thick enough to fill a person's open arms, and peered around the other side.

"Huh...?"

There was nothing there. She didn't think she'd imagined it.

Looking about as she took another step behind the support, she heard a creak somewhere very close by. A moment later, the sole of her shoe sank into the deck.

Waah!

She didn't even have time to scream before she slid along the floorboard she'd stepped through and plunged below. The daylight disappeared above her in an instant, and her vision went completely black. A second later, her rear end hit something hard (almost simultaneously, the radio around her neck floated up and whacked her in the chin). Not surprisingly, her breath caught for a minute.

"...Owww..."

Fortunately, the deck plank that fell with her worked like a slide and absorbed most of the shock, so the impact wasn't so bad considering the height of the fall. "That was close..." she muttered a bit angrily as she exhaled the breath she'd been holding. Still sitting on her rear, she turned her head and cast her eyes around.

A narrow hall stretched in either direction, illuminated by the faint light filtering in from overhead. (Of course, that was the hole that Kieli herself had created.) Narrow openings lined either side of the hall. These were once the frames holding doors leading into the ship's cabins, but most of them had fallen out. The few that managed to maintain their posts leaned as if about to come loose.

There was no telling how long the place had been abandoned. A sour smell settled heavily toward the bottom, and even the flow of air had stagnated and solidified throughout the desolate scenery stretching farther inside.

I know this place.

It was less like her own thought and more like the words floated into her head of their own accord, surprising even Kieli. "Why...?" She got an eerie feeling and tried to back her way along the floor on her hands when her fingers touched something. She started and turned around.

A small shadow was sitting on the floor.

It was a girl with chestnut curls and blue eyes; her legs, stretching out from her apron dress, were tossed carelessly in front of her. What was something like this doing here? The doll, still new, stood out in stark contrast to the ruined scene around her.

Kieli got scared and tried to distance herself out of some natural sense of self-preservation, but then stopped, as if the glass eyes wordlessly fixed on her were drawing her in.

She slowly reached out and picked up the doll.

Her hand looked strangely small as it gripped the doll's torso. On the other hand, she had the feeling the doll had gotten a little

bigger. She held it to her chest, tilted her head questioningly, and stared at her palm.

“You fell again?” A man’s voice came from above her head. Then a big hand scooped her up, and Kieli, still holding the doll, clung to his neck.

“Guess what, Haabie...”

Huh? The strange lisp in her own voice surprised her. As did not being able to say “Harvey” properly—she wasn’t the Corporal, after all.

She examined the face of the man she clung to and was even more surprised. She’d expected, as if it was only natural, that she would find unkempt copper hair hanging above his cheek and neck, but the lines in the face in front of her were thicker and bonier than she anticipated, and rough, sand-colored stubble grew from his unshaven chin. But she felt like his manner of speaking in a subdued tone and the aura surrounding him were oddly familiar somehow.

“Oh, there you go spoiling her again,” interjected someone else standing behind the man. It was a slightly husky woman’s voice mixed with a wry laugh. Kieli looked over the man’s shoulder and saw a black-haired woman appear on the other side of the corridor and was struck by a sense of *déjà vu*. The woman resembled someone she was very used to—or maybe very tired of—seeing.

The man walked toward her, still carrying Kieli. He moved quickly and with long strides, so Kieli hurried to wrap her arms around his neck. She could almost sense the doll’s annoyance at being squished between them.

When the pair met and stopped in front of one of the doors, Kieli realized something odd. The doors in the hall that moments earlier had been either tilting or completely unhinged, had all suddenly been repaired, and the glass in the round windows in those doors, which should have been broken, was all neatly in place.

One of those round windows reflected the man’s broad back and Kieli’s own face as she clung to his neck.

What she saw was a small girl with her black hair done up on either side of her head.

Who is this person...?

Next to her, the doll’s reflection in the round window giggled.

Kieli did feel as though the girl resembled someone the moment she saw her. Two or three years old, she wore her shoulder-length, catlike hair in two bunches on the sides of her head. It was difficult to say if she was cute or not, but at the very least, she couldn't bring herself to say that the downcast black eyes were very attractive.

...It's me, isn't it?

After staring at the girl in the glass in front of her for a while, this was the only conclusion Kieli could reach.

She sat with her knees folded on top of the bed in the cabin gazing at the window in the wall. Outside there was only the night sea and sky. A thick, dark blue-gray coated everything, and there wasn't really anything to look at. The thick glass, dirty with sandy dust, dimly reflected her younger self and the doll she held in her arms along with the man and woman facing each other farther inside the room.

Turning her head just halfway, Kieli looked sideways to observe the couple deep in conversation behind her. The man had his back to her as he sat at the edge of the bed, and she still couldn't get a clear view of his face. All she could see was his sand-colored hair cut short and his broad back, which told her that, even considering that she had shrunk, he was a large man.

The woman sat in a chair diagonally opposite him. Her white profile rose out of the darkness under a light in the ceiling that swung slowly left and right in time with the rocking of the ship.

"You hate Easterbury that much?" she asked in a calm voice that was rather low for a woman. She didn't press him as she regarded him fixedly, waiting for a response. Long, black hair gathered behind her head, black eyes, simple clothes that looked easy to move in over her slender body...Nothing about her was loud or showy, and she wasn't particularly beautiful. There was, however, something in her dark, dark eyes that was mysteriously alluring somehow.

"You can't get through to Westerbury from the east port without going through Easterbury. You're the one who said that Westerbury was crowded enough that you could probably hide yourself for a while there."

"But Easterbury..." the man muttered; his voice exhibited almost no emotion, but it had a slightly pained, complex feel to it.

"Does it still bother you?" The woman gave a light laugh laced

with a sigh. “Easterbury isn’t a battlefield anymore. It’s been decades since the War ended. You saw it with your own eyes; you should know better than anyone,” she said admonishingly as she wrapped her arms around his head in a gentle embrace. The man put his forehead on the woman’s shoulder and muttered, “I know.”

Somehow, Kieli realized why she thought he resembled Harvey earlier. It was his low voice with its suppressed emotion and his straightforward manner of speaking that nevertheless let a complaint slip occasionally as it did now—the entire air that hung around his whole body was similar, she thought.

“What is it, Kieli?”

She studied the man’s back, superimposing a copper-tinted head over it, and the woman noticed her stare and raised her face. She turned a slightly teasing but well-meaning smile toward her. “Are you jealous, Your Highness? Yes, yes, you want a hug, too, right?”

She left the man, knelt on the bed, and reached out her hands. “I’m not jealous,” Kieli sulked inwardly, but for some reason she couldn’t work up the will to resist. When the woman drew her near, she entrusted her full weight to her. Pressing her face to the woman’s chest, she noticed a faint, pleasant smell. This might have been the first time a woman’s arms, other than the rough, bony arms of her deceased grandmother, had held her. They were a little prickly, but strangely, she felt secure.

...I wonder if this is my mom...

She gave herself over to the comforting embrace and closed her eyes, naturally growing sleepy. When she let out a yawn, the woman chuckled. “It’s about time for little ones to be going to bed. If you don’t get lots of sleep, you won’t get big.”

Oh, so the reason I’m not very big at fourteen is that I didn’t get lots of sleep. Kieli acquiesced to the flawed reasoning and burrowed into the bed as she was told. She subconsciously pushed the question of why she was having such an experience when she was supposed to be fourteen to the back of her mind, buried her cheek in her pillow, and closed her eyes.



He didn’t mean to keep focusing on it, but in a corner of his

mind, Harvey kept reviewing the bullet holes he had just seen. Black holes pierced the walls in the hall in a line of rapid horizontal fire, and there were burn marks in the bored-out parts of the wall.

Carbonization guns.

The bullet holes themselves were very old, so he couldn't say for sure, but he knew intuitively.

"Ow...", Harvey whispered—without realizing it, he had bit his lip so hard that he cut it—and licked the blood that oozed into his mouth. It was thick and tasted like rusty iron. The cut was very shallow and had already closed up.

This ship had an Undying on it, and the Church Soldiers' Undying Hunters had attacked it. That was a scenario he could see happening, but he didn't know who the Undying had been. When he considered it, the thing that depressed him most was that they apparently had no qualms about pulling the trigger in the middle of a passenger ship that would have had innocents onboard.

The panic of people trying to escape, their screams of pain and terror—those emotions had been sewn into the walls of the hall along with the bullet holes, and the instant Harvey set foot inside, something flowed into his head as if pleading to him. So he immediately made an about-face and got the hell out of there.

"Hey, you. Hey! It's slanted." Harvey noticed a disgruntled voice calling to him at his feet and looked down to see Ka Rif crouching there. He indicated his hands and repeated, "It's slanted." Harvey followed his nod and saw that the metal plank he'd been told to hold even with the horizon was tilting forty-five degrees.

"Oh, sorry," Harvey answered in a stale tone that would be difficult to describe as sincere and used his right arm to level the plank he was holding. "I'm begging you, hold it steady," Ka Rif emphasized, then resumed nailing the plank down.

The crew had pushed down on the iron scrap they'd found to use as a lever, and by the time they succeeded in getting the *Sandwalker* off the drifting ship and into the ocean, the sun had gotten quite low in the sky. They erected some scaffolding from the deck of the drifter, half-sunken in sand, next to the *Sandwalker's* hull and started repairing the damage.

The sky melted from the gaseous orange of twilight to the blue-gray of night, and the glow reflected from the *Sandwalker's* deck lit their surroundings in a pale blue.

Harvey heard a whispered conversation above. It was kind of

boring just holding a board in place (though he still had no intention of taking a more active role in the repairs), so he raised his face to the voices. The light overhead was positioned directly behind them and blinded Harvey. Squinting, he saw the silhouettes of two men standing on the *Sandwalker's* deck, overlapping the green afterimage burned onto his retinas.

Judging by the physique, Harvey recognized Ol Han's silhouette right away. He didn't know the other man's name, but he was sure it was the sailor on watch when they collided with the derelict ship.

The two faced each other, deep in conversation, standing in front of some machine fastened to the edge of the deck. Harvey couldn't tell right away what it was. An iron rod, about a meter and a half in length, was loaded into something like a cylindrical firing platform, and a wire stretched from its tip connected to a large crank. When he saw that the rod was sharpened into an arrowhead at one end, he finally understood.

It was a harpoon for shooting sandworms. Harvey didn't think one had been in service when the previous leader had been in charge.

"Sandworm" was their common name; Harvey thought there was a scientific term for them—something like *megascorides alennius*—but he wasn't inclined to exert the effort to remember it, so he didn't. They were among the few indigenous creatures inhabiting this planet before colonization. They were giant, grotesque annelids, and adults grew to about a meter in diameter. They lived inside the sand and sometimes attacked sand ships, capsizing them.

"When'd you mount that thing?" Harvey asked Ka Rif casually. The sailor stopped working, looking puzzled for a second, but finally noticed what he was looking at and nodded. "Oh, that. I guess it'd be two, three years ago. We were attacked by a grown sandworm and installed it after that."

"They won't attack you as long as you stay out of their territory. Shouldn't you guys know that better than me?" Harvey frowned, skeptical. Everything he knew about sandworms he'd learned from their old leader, so of course Ol Han would know. Harvey couldn't imagine that the rest of the *Sandwalker* crew wouldn't know it, too.

Ka Rif angled his head, wondering why Harvey seemed so fixated on the harpoon. "We have jobs where we have no choice but to go into their territory. The Church is trying to make a detailed

map of the entire Sand Ocean, and we have to show them—”

“Wait,” Harvey interrupted, dropping the board. Gravity took over, and Ka Rif fell on his backside to avoid being flattened. “Hey, watch out!” the sailor yelled in protest, but Harvey ignored him.

“What did you say? The Church?” Harvey demanded, bending down and looking Ka Rif squarely in the eye. His tone was more menacing than he intended, as if he might grab the sailor’s collar, and Ka Rif pulled back, frightened.

“Yeah, we guide the Church’s ships through the stretches of ocean we know...”

“I thought the Church treated you guys like heretics. Why are you helping them?”

“That was a long time ago. Since Ol Han became the leader, things have been going pretty well with them. I thought you’d heard all about it.”

“Ol Han didn’t tell me anything,” he muttered in astonishment, looking up at Ol Han’s silhouette. Harvey was so shaken, he couldn’t think straight. Maybe it wasn’t that serious and he was overreacting. But a loud warning bell was going off in his head, and Harvey trusted his instincts—but this was one time he didn’t want to be right.

“Where’s Kieli?” Harvey wondered aloud, standing and shoving Ka Rif aside. He looked around, but all he could make out in the lamplight were the sailors making repairs; the girl was nowhere to be seen.

That idiot, where did she...?

Actually, I’m *the idiot*, he cursed inwardly. He hadn’t checked on her for a while. Since she had the Corporal hanging from her neck, he hadn’t been too concerned, but of course now he remembered that the antique was still broken.

“If you’re looking for the girl, I saw her go inside a while ago...,” Ka Rif volunteered, indicating the abandoned ship, his rear still planted on the scaffolding. Harvey turned and saw the pitch-black maw leading into the derelict vessel. *I told her not to, but of course she went anyway...*

Still, now that he had an idea where she was, he relaxed a little and sighed, “She’s hopeless...” He turned on his heels.

“Harvey, where are you going?” called a thick voice overhead. Harvey stopped, directing his attention to the *Sandwalker*’s deck; a black shadow stood in the center as if cut into the white light. He

was facing Harvey, but his expression was lost in the backlighting. Harvey held up a hand and squinted at the silhouette.

"I'm going to look for Kieli. Apparently she went inside."

"Oh, I'll send one of my guys; don't worry about it. Ka Rif, go."

"Ah? Oh, yeah, okay," Ka Rif answered haltingly, flustered by the sudden nomination, and stood up. "It's okay, I don't mind." Harvey reached out a hand, blocking Ka Rif as he tried to run past.

"I'll go. You finish up."

It was Harvey's fault that Ka Rif's repairs were progressing so slowly, but he pointed at the unfinished task anyway, then turned and left Ka Rif in his wake.

He crossed the steel scaffolding and jumped down onto the drifter's deck without missing a beat and headed inside.

Thunk...

Harvey heard a very heavy, but somehow delayed, dull explosion behind him—or rather, it started behind him and then pierced right through.

".....?"

Harvey's knees buckled, as if something was pulling him, and he fell forward.

Sprawling on the ground, he examined himself in a daze, and a harpoon, wet with blood, was protruding from his abdomen and pinning him to the deck. As the initial shock passed, a wave of nausea and intense pain raced up his esophagus. His nerves immediately compensated for the pain, but he couldn't suppress the nausea and gagged violently; clumps of blood laced with vomit spewed copiously from the recesses of his throat.

"What the..."

With significant effort, Harvey managed to contort his face away from the deck, stained with his own blood.

He saw the base of the harpoon sticking out of his back. A round, metal clasp was affixed to the end of the meter-and-a-half-long rod, and an iron wire extended from it stretching all the way to the crank bolted to the deck of the *Sandwalker*.

A figure stood beside the crank. Harvey's eyes again adjusted to the light, and he could make out the man's face floating beneath a green afterimage. A familiar vulgar, but somehow charming, carefree smile was plastered on his lips; his hand rested on the harpoon's firing mechanism.

"Y-you, what do you think you're..."

“Wh-what? Ol Han?” Standing behind Harvey and stuttering incoherently, Ka Rif seemed more shaken than the Undying.

“Oh, don’t worry. That scratch won’t kill him. Right?” Ol Han’s voice reverberated through the night so casually as to be infuriating. The sailors who had been working on the deck gathered around him in a circle, blankly surveying their leader’s handiwork. Harvey barely noticed them as he twisted his neck to confront Ol Han.

“Thanks for vouching for me...” Bloody foam erupted from Harvey’s mouth as he spat sarcastically. Even without the pain, the sensation of a foreign object piercing his belly could not have been more unpleasant, and the Undying couldn’t have been angrier. Maybe his rage was so intense that it snapped something in his brain, because Harvey’s clarity given the circumstances surprised even him.

“You’ve got a crazy price on your head. They say an Undying they caught in Easterbury took a young girl hostage and escaped. It’s you and the girl, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah, well. So it would seem.” Part of the story seemed to have gotten twisted in the retelling, but Harvey didn’t feel like splitting hairs and nodded carelessly. (Hell, if all the guilt fell on him, leaving Kieli blameless, he welcomed it.) “So you were planning to hand the marks over to the Church, treat us like friends, and just wait for your chance.”

“You don’t have to believe me, but I wasn’t pretending. I don’t hate you, Harvey. It’s just a conflict of interests is all.”

“...I didn’t hate you either.”

As the white light shone from the lantern and the impassive sailors looked on, the exchange between Harvey and Ol Han sounded very hollow. The card game the night before, his drunken, boorish old friend taunting him, the cheerful merry-making of the sailors—Harvey had felt nostalgic, like nothing had changed, but he had probably been deluding himself.

“Sorry about this,” Ol Han apologized thinly, but it did little to move Harvey. “We do things differently now than we did back in the day. If we cooperate with the Church, we don’t have to deal with any of their abuse, and it’s easier to get supplies at port. I learned a better way to do things than when the old man was in charge.”

“If you’re gonna wag your tail for the Church because you don’t

like persecution, don't practice a heretical religion to begin with. What are you, stupid?" Harvey's venomous retort consumed the last bit of air in his lungs; when he drew breath again, a blood clot caught in his throat, and he hacked—"Guh...!"—driving the harpoon even farther through his abdomen. He almost fainted in agony, unable to stand even the suppressed sensation of the foreign object crawling through his body.

The tip of the harpoon lanced the deck firmly, pinning Harvey like an insect. An Undying specimen. Apparently he wasn't an appealing one.

Some of the sailors surrounding him covered their mouths with their hands and looked away. Harvey heard someone mutter in disgust, "He's still alive after all this?"



“Ka Rif. Find the girl.”

Hearing Ol Han’s order, Ka Rif, who had been frozen in shock, jumped up, startled. “Ah, r-roger!” he responded inarticulately, extricating himself from the assembled sailors and heading below-deck. Sprinting past Harvey, Ka Rif cast him a sidelong glance.

One cheek plastered to the deck, Harvey stared wordlessly at the sailor; he’d been sharing a normal conversation with this man just a little while before. When Harvey caught Ka Rif’s terrified gaze, as if he was looking at something repellent, he couldn’t help turning away.



Kieli suddenly awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of someone whispering by her pillow. It was a charming, high voice, like the chirping of birds.

Kieli poked half of her face out from inside her blanket and squinted into the darkness.

A doll fashioned in the image of a young girl sat beside her pillow. Chestnut curls, blue glass eyes, blushing cheeks. The legs that extended from under her dark green apron dress *swung back and forth*, as if she was bored, and although she had no one to talk to, her high-pitched, soprano voice *chattered incessantly* in a subdued whisper.

As Kieli listened attentively, the doll’s adorable lips, still smiling, spat one hateful complaint after another, like, “That damn third-rate doll maker! I *told* him to make my eyes out of jade, but he used these cheap glass balls. He can go to hell ten million times,” or, “How dare that black bear grab my leg and swing me around. He deserved what he got, being taken off by the garbage collectors.”

Kieli froze automatically, gaping at the doll. The string of abusive language ceased abruptly, and a strange silence settled over them.

A girl’s face rose palely from the darkness, creaking as it turned ninety degrees toward her. The glass eyes didn’t blink, fixed in an

eerie stare; only her red lips moved, demanding suddenly, "Hello! Stop eavesdropping, and let's play!"

"!" Kieli shrieked and drew back in surprise. The small bunk creaked. "Hm...? What's wrong?" Kieli's mother, sleeping next to her, stirred and asked drowsily.

That instant, the doll froze, regarding her with a chilling smile plastered to her innocent face.

"My doll! She was talking...!" Kieli wailed, lisping, as she clung to her mother's arm. Her mother just sighed in exasperation. "Oh, is that all?" But she didn't say it mockingly or as if consoling her daughter after a bad dream; she said it very plainly, as if it was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Even dolls talk sometimes, when they're bored. You'd be bored, too, if you had to sit quietly wearing the same outfit all the time."

"But..." Kieli wasn't remotely satisfied with the explanation, but as she couldn't think of anything to counter, she reluctantly fell silent.

Her mother held Kieli's hand and put it back under the blanket, gently tucked her back in, and said, "Kieli, sometimes you see things that people can't see, but there's no reason to be afraid. I'm sure that someday that power of yours will be helpful to someone."

"Helpful to who?" The little girl regarded her mother skeptically, half burying her face in her blanket.

"I don't know. It might be lots of people, or maybe just one person. But I know there's someone who needs you, and that person is waiting to meet you."

"Waiting for me? Is that person in trouble?"

"Yes, I think so. That's why you have to be a good friend and help."

"Hmm..." Kieli thought about helping someone and finally declared, "Okay. Then Kieli will be that person's friend. Even if the whole world is against him, Kieli will be his friend."

Her mother chuckled, apparently finding it funny, and put her hand on Kieli's forehead, telling her to go to sleep. Her mother's palm was cool and pleasant, and when her white fingertips brushed the hair off Kieli's forehead, they smelled of soap.

Closing her eyes, Kieli could feel the gentle vibrations of the ship and the low hum of its engine. She felt as if she was in a cradle as she surrendered herself to the soothing rocking and finally fell

asleep.

There was a loud *boom*, and the ship shuddered violently.

Snapped awake, Kieli's eyes flew open. Her mother quickly rose and slipped out of bed. As she did, the cabin door opened, and a shadow flew inside with surprising agility given its size. It was the man from before with the short, sand-colored hair and stubble. The faint light from the hall hit him from behind, so Kieli couldn't see his face very well.

"Setsuri. This is bad." The man addressed Kieli's mother with stifled urgency. Although she had no idea what was going on, Kieli sensed the tension thick in the air. She clutched her doll and blanket, afraid to move. A commotion broke out in the hall, and she could hear a woman screaming far away. "Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" The doll in her arms screamed, too, as if finding inspiration. The shriek, like tearing metal, sent a chill up her spine, and of course Kieli winced, but her mother and the man grimaced as well.

"They're after me. I thought they wouldn't try anything until we got to port because there are civilians onboard, but..." *I was too naive*, is probably what he cursed, vexed, under his breath. Kieli's mother, on the other hand, calmly started gathering their things. "Hurry and get ready." The man nodded, bracing himself, then took some luggage in one hand and collected Kieli with the other.

"Kyaaa, kyaaa," persisted the doll. Kieli hurriedly adjusted her grip on the toy and wrapped her arms around the man's neck.

"Hold on tight," a subdued voice whispered in Kieli's ear. She really did think his aura was reminiscent of someone—who was that "someone" again? Kieli had clearly been of a mind that he resembled someone, but now she couldn't remember whom. Now that she considered it, which came first—her memories of meeting that "someone" or of this person? She got the feeling that rather than saying that the man cradling her in his arms resembled someone, she might instead say that that someone resembled this man.

Without wasting a word, they finished their preparations, and Kieli's mother was the first to glide out of the room with Kieli's protector following closely on her heels. As she clung to his neck, Kieli could see through the porthole in their room.

Beyond the glass lay utter darkness, a blackness almost too complete; even when the ocean was its darkest, she had only seen it a deep, indigo-gray, never this perfect ebony.

This wasn't the ocean. A ship painted blacker than the night's own darkness was moored alongside the window, obscuring the oceanscape that should have been there. No sooner had the realization struck her, though, than Kieli was carried outside the cabin and walls rose up to block her view of the black ship.

In the hall, the familiar man carrying Kieli turned a sharp right in pursuit of her mother.

"Ah!" Kieli, the only one with a view to the rear, let out an involuntary scream. Foreshadowed by metallic footsteps, several figures rounded the corner on the other end of the corridor. Their appearances were bizarre, shrouded in distorted metal armor that gave the impression that there weren't necessarily men inside at all, merely shells moving of their own accord. In stark contrast to this white armor, they carried pitch-black objects resembling stocky iron pipes in both hands.

"Don't stick your head out. Duck down."

The man carrying Kieli didn't turn around once, but it seemed that the girl's scream hadn't been necessary to alert him to their presence. Kieli started at his stern voice and ducked down; the instant she did...

Fwaboom!

...an explosion resonated through the corridor. For an instant, a strange sense of déjà vu overtook her. Though it was her first experience with the sound, it was already etched in her memory. Memories so terrible they froze her heart and her own screams suddenly flooded her mind. Harvey! Whose name was that?!

The girl had no time to place it. The man in whose arms she huddled was blasted forward with a *thunk*; Kieli's neck nearly snapped back at the impact. She panicked and clung to his shoulder.

"I'm fine. It's nothing. Hurry." The reassurances ringing in her ear were probably directed at Kieli's mother. The man only staggered once, his pace never slackening. Kieli clutched her doll and threw her arm around the man's back so as not to be shaken off.

A strange texture met her palm. ".....?" As her vision bucked, she strained to catch a glimpse of her handhold.

Her protector's entire broad back was charred. Half his skin had turned to ash, and it crumbled where Kieli touched it. Horrified, she let go, and very nearly fell, but the man scooped her up.

“Hold on tight.”

“You’re hurt...!”

“It’s just a scratch. Don’t talk; you’ll bite your tongue.”

No matter how she looked at it, this was far more than “just a scratch,” but his voice was comforting, as if he didn’t feel any pain at all. At least it was calm on the surface.

Undying. Abruptly the word came to her although she didn’t know its meaning. Just like that sense of *déjà vu* before, she shouldn’t have known the term, but for some reason, it was burned in her brain.

Suddenly the man stopped running, jerking Kieli’s head forward and back. She turned to see what was going on, and her mother, who’d been two steps ahead of them, had stopped as well and was peering through a thick iron door. Kieli could see a narrow staircase leading down into the darkness.

“Go ahead, Setsuri. I’ll be right behind you,” the man prompted, peeling Kieli from around his neck and shoving her toward her mother. Young Kieli almost dropped her doll, but snatched it up hurriedly.

“No.”

Hearing her mother’s response, Kieli lifted her head in disbelief.

Setsuri bit her lip like a spoiled child and glared at the man holding her daughter. Apparently he was just as taken aback by her reaction and stood dumbstruck before finally managing, “What are you saying?! What do you mean ‘no’?”

“Why do you always try to sacrifice yourself? I’m staying with you.”

“One of us has to protect Kieli. I’ll be right behind you, no matter what.”

“But...!”

“Go. Hurry.” Kieli’s mother was still trying to protest, but the man wouldn’t take no for an answer. Reluctantly she swallowed her words and ran noiselessly down the galvanized stairs. Clutching her doll, Kieli clung to her mother’s neck and watched the rectangular cut of yellow light that was the entrance to the staircase recede into the darkness. A tall black shadow silhouetted against that fading light suddenly turned and ran back down the hall.

Within moments, a succession of muffled gunshots punctuated their arrival at the base of the stairs.

Setsuri turned in shock, and over her mother’s shoulder, Kieli

took in the ship's gloomy hold. Containers of varying sizes were stacked haphazardly. Kieli could vaguely distinguish a rectangular outline along the external wall—probably the cargo hatch—where a small craft, somewhat more boatlike than a raft, had been installed.

Setsuri spun and dashed inside the hold, so Kieli's field of vision swung around again. Her mother opened a container next to the lifeboat and placed Kieli inside. It was packed with burlap sacks, but there was just enough space to stow a single child. Kieli sat on top of one of the sacks and looked up at her mother.

"Can you wait here just a little bit? I'll come right back to get you."

"Okay."

Kieli bobbed her head, and her mother, smiling, repeated, "Good girl. I'll be right back to get you." Setsuri paused, though, reaching out and stroking Kieli's hair, as if she couldn't quite bring herself to leave. Seeing her mother's pained expression, Kieli felt the need to reassure her.

"I'm fine. My doll's with me. I can wait a bit," she said cheerfully, indicating the doll in her arms. The gesture softened Setsuri's expression, and she leaned over the edge of the container and kissed Kieli, her daughter, on the forehead.

"I love you, Kieli."

Kieli closed her eyes at the wispy sensation. When she opened them again, the lid above her had been quietly shut, and the inside of the container was utterly black.

Muffled footsteps and gunshots rang out intermittently far above Kieli's head. Sitting on the linen sack, she clutched her knees and held her doll tightly to her chest, but this was the moment the doll chose to behave like a doll and said nothing to ease the silence.

I'm fine, Kieli murmured again. The person who needed her mother because the whole world was against him was probably that man. So Kieli was fine; she could wait, even by herself...

Holding her head and clutching her knees, Kieli must've drifted off to sleep.

Before she knew it, the footsteps, the gunshots, and even the sound of the engine perpetually reverberating below the ship had vanished, leaving her in complete silence. It was so quiet that her ears hurt.

Kieli stood up slowly. She stood on her tiptoes on the burlap

sack, pushed the container's lid open, threw her doll to the floor, then climbed out herself. When she finally managed to extricate herself from the container, the doll was staring resentfully at her in the darkness.

Grabbing the doll's hand, letting her dangle by one arm, Kieli started climbing the stairs, staggering a little. As she approached the top, the smell of something burnt wafted toward her.

Gunsmoke filled the corridor. Yellowish smoke enveloped the long, narrow space that stretched in either direction, illuminated by the weakly flickering lights in the ceiling. There were no signs of people; at least no one was moving, and except for her own tiny footsteps and the occasional sound of charred pieces of wall collapsing, the area was deathly silent.

Dragging her doll along, Kieli made her way aimlessly down the hall a little; the tip of her shoe stepped on something, and she heard a dry, crinkling sound. She regarded the smoke settling around her feet.

Long black hair stretched across the floor like flowing water, forming a gentle arc.

She traced the flow of hair and found its owner lying at the end. Her back was cruelly scorched.

Her jet-black eyelashes were shut tight—she would never move again.

For a long time, Kieli just stood there, looking blankly at the white profile lying prostrate at her feet. Kieli's heart felt empty and flat; it was strange that she couldn't summon any of the emotions she'd have expected to well up inside her at times like this, and she was sure it was a dream. This couldn't be real, but how could she wake up from it? Those were the things she contemplated vaguely on the surface of her mind.

She didn't know how much time had passed; she noticed low voices and the sounds of feet approaching across the cinders piled up on the floor and lifted her head. She saw a few silhouettes through the smoke that hung thick in the corridor.

Out of reflex, she froze and watched carefully as the figures came closer.

They weren't the white suits of armor, like a troop of devils, that approached, but five, six men wearing shoddy overcoats. "This is terrible..." "How many survivors are there now?" "Anyway, let's send the injured to the eastern port. We're under pressure, too; it's

all we can do to feed ourselves.” “Should we set the dead adrift...?” They walked through the gunsmoke, exchanging whispered conversations.

“Oh! There’s still another survivor. It’s a kid,” one of them spoke up, noticing her. He suddenly addressed her in a loud voice, and Kieli automatically jumped and backed away. “Whoops! Did I scare you...?” The man immediately toned his voice down and crouched to eye level with the small Kieli, as though he were dealing with a small, frightened animal, and came closer.

“That must have been scary. It’s okay now.”

She got the feeling she had seen his face before, but that was probably the same sense of *déjà vu* she’d had earlier. There was a benign smile on his fearless face as he looked into Kieli’s; then he noticed the dead body beside her and lowered his gaze.

“Your mom...?”

Kieli gave a little nod, her lips pressed tightly together.

“I see.” The man gave a short sigh and reached out his big hands to pick Kieli up. “The Church...” she heard him mutter in her ear. But she thought he was talking to himself. “If they didn’t disobey the Church, these things wouldn’t happen. No one would get hurt. Life would be easier...”

Kieli didn’t say anything. She couldn’t remember how to use her voice. She didn’t cling to him on her own—only let him hold her without resisting—and when she put her chin on the man’s broad shoulder, she smelled sand and sweat. Over his shoulder, she could see her mother’s remains lying on the floor.

The slender wrist of the doll she had been holding slipped through her hand. Still smiling, the doll fell through the settling smoke and hit the floor with a lonely *thunk*.

The scenery in her field of vision changed.

Kieli was standing alone in the middle of the corridor. The corpse lying at her feet and the men in overcoats were nowhere in sight. Stagnant air, as if the ship had been abandoned and no one had entered for years, hung around her ankles. The doors lining her right and left were rusted and leaning, and the glass from most of their round windows had fallen out; the few panes that did remain were cracked, and sand had built up in the gaps.

She could see her own reflection, twisted in the broken glass. The girl standing there was fourteen, with short hair cut to the nape of her neck, and an old radio hanging around her neck.

Only the doll was the same as before, lying fallen at her feet and looking up at her with its blue glass eyes. But her chestnut curls were a tangled mess, and her dark green apron dress was so faded, it was hard to discern its original color.

“Were those...?” Before she knew it, she remembered how to talk. “Were those your memories...?”

The doll didn’t answer the question. She gazed at her; her cheeks that used to be a soft, rosy color were now completely stained and faded; she had the same, but somehow sad, smile as before.

After a pause, Kieli crouched down and reached out to pick up the doll.

But suddenly someone grabbed her wrist. When she looked up, a young sailor wearing a dark brown overcoat—Ka Rif—was looking down at her with a stiff expression.

“What’s...”

“You have to run,” he told her abruptly. Kieli blinked. Ka Rif looked extremely serious; he held her wrist so tightly it hurt and repeated, “I’ll help you escape. You’re a normal human being, right? This has nothing to do with you.”

“...Did something happen to Harvey?” She understood intuitively, and the question came to her mouth before her mind even processed it. She may have been watching the past, but when she realized that she couldn’t remember Harvey’s name even for a second a short while ago, she was surprised at herself.

Ka Rif hung his head awkwardly, but after half a moment, he appeared to make up his mind and looked up.

“He’s okay. Something like that wouldn’t kill an Undying, right? But you’re a normal girl, so...”

“Harvey’s normal, too! He feels pain like normal, and gets hurt like normal, and gets depressed like normal! It’s so obvious, so why...” When she wailed to that point, the first part of what Ka Rif said finally struck her. Something like *what* wouldn’t kill him?!

“What did you do? What did you do?!” Her wrist still in Ka Rif’s grasp, Kieli used that hand to grab his coat and pull him toward her. He only averted his gaze and faltered for words, so she shoved him away with both hands, and quickly turned. But he still had her wrist, and she was immediately pulled back.

“If you won’t let me go, then take me to him! Hurry!” she shouted, her voice abnormally high.

The instant the scene met her eyes, a strange series of associations must have gone to work in her brain, because what came to her mind, as if overlapping her retinas, was the bishop's staff card from the temple suit—a giant bishop's staff with a ring on the end of the handle, skewering the corpse of a heretic, protruding out of the temple floor.

The lantern illuminated a long metal rod sticking out of the center of the deck. A circular metal fixture was attached to the end, making it resemble the ring on a bishop's staff, and a wire extended from it.

And, like the heretic in the card, skewered from behind and sewn to the ground, was...

“.....!”

She meant to scream, but her voice caught in her throat, and all that came out was a rasping breath. A few of the sailors standing in a semicircle around *it* noticed her and turned around.

“Let go, let go!”

Kieli waved her arm violently and shook off Ka Rif's hand. He had already loosened his grip on her, so she came free all too easily, and she almost fell over with the excess force as she ran toward the half-circle of gathered sailors. She would have struggled if anyone had stopped her, but no one held her back, and she slipped through the group of men and sat down beside the harpoon sticking into the deck.

“Harvey...!” By the time she was finally able to call his name out loud, she was half crying.

Harvey, his cheek still plastered to the deck, moved just his eyes to look up at her and his lips shifted faintly. “What? Does it hurt? It hurts, doesn't it? I'll pull it out right now.” Her sobbing voice ran on, her face close to his.

“Don't stomp around like that; I feel it in my stomach...,” he cursed, in a voice he had to wring out from the back of his throat, and coughed lightly. Maybe he'd already coughed up everything he had inside long ago; it was no more than a dry hacking as his cheek lay flat in the pool of his own blood, a tired look on his face.

“Harvey, no, hang in there—”

“It's okay, don't shout. I'm fine; I've cut off the pain.”

Harvey's eyes were closed, and his eyebrows frowned in annoyance; Kieli tried to cling to him, but he pushed her away. He could say otherwise, but he really did not look fine.

“Why? You were getting along so well...”

Kieli raised her face in astonishment and looked around at the sailors surrounding them at a distance. They stood about as if watching a wild animal about to die—an animal that they had hunted for food, struggling at the brink of death, waiting for it to expire. If she had to compare it to something, that’s what the flat, not particularly emotional expressions looked like, lined up under the lantern’s white light. Only Ka Rif, behind them, looked scared, and his gaze hurried back and forth imploringly.

When she glanced up to see where he was looking, the light from the lantern pierced her eyes as it illuminated the area from the *Sandwalker*, lodged on top of the drifting ship. She squinted and peered up at the silhouette standing in the glare.

“Relax; we’re not gonna do anything to you. When we’re done with our business, we’ll take you to port.” The shadow’s voice sounded familiar—not as the leader of the *Sandwalker*, but inside her memories of the past from a moment ago.

“You should never hang out with Undyings again. A lot of people died because of them. These guys don’t die even if you kill ’em; it’s always the normal humans that get sacrificed. Looks like it’s not enough for them to have killed all the people they butchered in the War.”

“What are you saying?!...”

“Stop it.”

Kieli started to stand up, enraged by Ol Han’s last sentence, but a short voice held her back, and something pulled her hand. Still half rising, she dropped her gaze and saw Harvey’s blood-soaked left hand holding hers. “Let him talk,” he spat a little carelessly and closed his eyes, adding under his breath, “It’s all true.”

“All right, finish the repairs and get ready to set sail. We meet up with the Church Soldiers’ ship in the morning.” Ol Han’s voice echoed across the deck after a minute of silence.

The sailors around them scattered, leaving a few men to keep watch. Kieli glared at them in disappointment as they left, and, before she was aware of it, she was holding Harvey’s hand very tightly.

“It’s okay; just wait a little. I can move if I put my mind to it,” Harvey, still facedown on the deck, whispered in a voice only Kieli could hear. She looked and saw that his prosthetic right arm, caught under him, was grabbing the base of the harpoon. He

probably meant that he could pull it out if he felt like it, but it seemed to her that if he actually did, it would put an impossible strain on Harvey's body, and it didn't give Kieli a scrap of relief.

Maybe he sensed her anxiety; Harvey returned her grip lightly, as if telling her to calm down. But immediately after, he coughed again. "Damn, this is hard..." he whispered in complaint, understandably having a difficult time enduring. Kieli had lost all words, and all she could do was squeeze his hand. "Say something," he told her abruptly, and she blinked her tear-filled eyes.

"Don't sit there all quiet; say something."

"Something? But..."

"Something to distract me. Was there anything interesting inside the ship?"

"Ah!"

Now that he brought it up, memories of what had happened below-deck, which had vanished in light of more pressing incidents, came flooding back. "Guess what? I was on this ship...!" She started speaking enthusiastically, but there were so many things to recount that she didn't know where to begin. That apparently she had been on this ship before, that her mother had been with her, that the armored Church Soldiers had come on board and her mother...her mother had died...

Kieli hung her head and bit her lower lip. The terrible event had lain buried at the bottom of her memories until now, and she alone had gone on to live a carefree life. When she hadn't known, she wasn't sad, because she was ignorant. But now that she did know, she couldn't imagine her past to be anything but painful; even so, she didn't think that it would have been better not to have found out. Her mother was pretty—no, she certainly wouldn't call her a stunning beauty, but she was very pretty—and she was just the kind of person Kieli imagined would be nice to have for a mother...

She suddenly felt Harvey's fingertips on her chin. "Oops, sorry. I got blood on you," he said in a casual tone, removing his hand, but his quiet, copper-colored eyes stared up at her questioningly.

"...What's wrong?"

"Ah, I'm fine. I just can't quite sort it all out..."

Kieli hurried to wipe the tears that had managed to slide down her cheeks without her noticing. "Oh, you don't have to sort it out. Start with the first thing you think of." Hearing Harvey talk like

that again, she thought he really did resemble the man from before, but it wasn't as if they were completely the same—there were sides of Harvey that only Kieli knew—and strangely, that thought calmed her down and she was able to think.

Come to think of it, that man...

She called to mind the profile of that man who was with her mother, his sand-colored stubble and bony jaw, and suddenly realized something strange.

Even though she immediately recognized her mother as her mother without question, for some reason, she never made the connection that the man might have been her father. Given the situation, it would have been natural to think that he was her father. Maybe it was that, just as she couldn't imagine Harvey being anyone's parent, she didn't get a fatherly vibe from the man who resembled Harvey, either.

But one fundamental question preceded that line of thinking. "Can Undying have children?"

"Wha?"

Kieli let her mouth run without thinking too hard; Harvey gaped, speechless, for a second. "No, well, they can do the thing that *would* make children, but as for whether or not any children would be produced, I don't..." he mused, but suddenly cut himself off; then, for some reason, the most complex of expressions contorted his face and he looked away.

"Did I ask a weird question...?"

"...No, not really," he said, but still clammed up, so Kieli faltered and closed her mouth, too, and a strangely awkward silence fell over them.

The light that had been so glaringly bright until a while ago was now mostly directed at the work at the bow, so now only a pale, bluish glow fell around the two of them. Apparently they had finished the rest of the repairs, and the sailors were pulling up the scaffolding that crossed over to the *Sandwalker's* hull.

Then...

"What...?"

An upward force suddenly bucked beneath her feet, shaking the deck's floorboards.

The remaining scaffolding clattered down between the two ships into the ocean. "Uwaaahh!" the sailors fell over themselves, evacuating to the drifter's deck.

As they scrambled across, the two ships started leaning in opposite directions, as if something was pushing them up from the middle.

Still sitting, Kieli slid sideways across the deck; she caught sight of a wire and instinctively reached out for it. She realized a second later that it was the wire connected to the harpoon stuck through Harvey, at which point Harvey screamed, "Ow!" She let go quickly, but Harvey burst out angrily, "Stupid, don't let go!" and grabbed her hand again.

It was chaos as the sailors screamed and slid to the stern, but thanks to the harpoon, Harvey and Kieli alone remained in the middle of the diagonal surface—still, in this condition, Harvey's innards would be squished!

"Something's..." Harvey muttered something, twisting his face in pain, and cast a look toward the top of the slanting deck. She could tell that he had said, "Something's coming," but she still didn't know what he meant. As she followed his gaze, a low vibration like an earthquake echoed up from the bottom of the boat.

Rr, rrrrrr...

With a heavy sound, like something huge crawling through sand, the vibration moved from one end of the ship's underbelly to the other...

And on the other side of the deck rail *it* showed itself.

"

Snap...!

She thought she heard something tearing apart nearby—by the time she processed the sound, the tip of the harpoon ripped up the floorboards as it was dragged through them—“Eh...?” “Wah!”—and plowed a straight line toward the top of the ship.

The harpoon caught on the rail at the top of the ship, and Kieli heard a dull, metallic sound; in the same instant, Harvey released her. She panicked, grabbing at the radio’s cord before it slipped off her neck, and yelled, “Harvey!”

Clinging to the rail, she looked frantically at the sand below; the wire, still affixed to Harvey, dragged him into the ocean. He plunged back-first into the high waves of sand, and the wire stretching from the *Sandwalker* was the only thing left above the surface as the sand swallowed him in the blink of an eye. “Harvey!” Out of reflex, Kieli slid through a gap in the railing and tried to jump into the ocean herself.

“Wait, Kieli!” a voice abruptly called out from an unexpected direction to stop her. She turned back in surprise and saw a small silhouette in the shadows of the door leading inside the ship—the lovely doll in the faded apron dress was beckoning to her. “This way, this way.”

“It won’t help anyone if you throw yourself over, too. This way.”

“But...!”

“Even if you did jump, what could you do then? Think carefully. You’re going to help him, right?” she told Kieli flatly, and Kieli faltered, unable to object. The doll turned her smiling, childlike face left and right, and said, “Hurry,” in a sharp voice that contradicted her expression; then she disappeared inside the ship.

When the sandworm burrowed its massive bulk into the ocean, the force pushing the ship upward vanished, and, rocking violently, the deck leveled with the horizon. The sailors who had been pushed to the stern started picking themselves up with murmurs of relief.

Kieli screwed up her face and nodded, then ran after the doll.

For a second her eyes met Ka Rif’s as he picked himself up off the edge of the deck. He noticed her moving and seemed to start to say something, but after a pause, he closed his mouth without a word. But another sailor saw her as well and shouted, “The girl’s getting away!”

By that time, Kieli was approaching the stairs that led down

into the ship. Another upheaval rocked beneath her feet, and she turned to see the deck as the sandworm passed over the ship, menacing the sailors.

Kieli returned her attention to the ship's interior. The doll in the apron dress was standing at the bottom of the gloomy stairs; she whispered quickly, "Now's your chance." She went ahead of Kieli, who had started to run down after her, and her small feet hurriedly jumped down each step.

"I asked him to make a bit of a show, but I didn't think he'd pull the *wire*."

"*You* did that...?!" Kieli asked in astonishment; the doll half turned her head and smiled mischievously.

He could remember hundreds of times when he seriously thought it would be better to just die, but there was no question that the current situation was one of the more extreme examples. Harvey couldn't even lose consciousness, so that's what he thought about, with unusual composure, in the back of his mind.

The harpoon's hook had opened like an umbrella and was eating into his abdomen as the wire dragged him across the sand; it was a pretty horrific scenario. He'd rather it just come out, even if it did rip out all his organs with it; but as soon as the wound opened up, it started regenerating, so it was literally eating away at his stomach.

"Damn it...!"

Harvey twisted over, changed his posture on the sand, and reached back to try to do something about the wire behind him. His prosthetic right arm caught the cord, and wrapped it around his wrist, pulling his body forward to lessen the force driving into his belly. Somehow he managed to breathe again.

The problem is that...

As he was dragged along, he trained his eyes on the end of the wire, where he could see the crank fastened on to the *Sandwalker's* deck. Beyond it, he saw Ol Han, possibly trying to reel him in.

That bastard...

He clicked his tongue and cursed inwardly at the other man; just then, the sand in front of his eyes swelled, blocking his view. "Wah, you're kidding me..." The surface of the ocean formed a cone, like the slope of a mountain, and he rolled to the side, still hanging from the wire.

A large quantity of sediment sliding off its rough body, the sandworm from before (he'd hate it if there were two or three of those things) showed itself again. Harvey had seen sandworms lots of times when the old leader was taking care of him, but of course he had never encountered one this enormous. That thing would definitely have no problem swallowing him whole, he thought unconsciously—half hoping—then started to panic and hurried to erase the image from his mind.

It couldn't possibly have been doing it purposely, but the sandworm bent its body so as to catch the wire that stretched from the *Sandwalker* with its neck (not that Harvey knew where its neck was). Forced into a different direction, the harpoon sank into his body again, and he swallowed a scream; just then, with the short sound of something shaking free, the wire abruptly went slack.

“

own and grabbed the edge of the boat. With the girl's help, Harvey crawled up the side of the boat and flopped inside.

Cough...!

The harpoon still pierced his body, so he couldn't lie prostrate; he fell onto his side, curled up, and started coughing violently. He coughed up more blood than sand.

"Hold on just a little longer; I'll pull it out right now."

Kieli knelt beside him and put her hand on the tip of the barb—red pieces of flesh and black, tarlike blood stuck to it in a sort of pattern. Harvey didn't want to touch it anymore, but she didn't show a sliver of hesitation. "It's okay; I'll do it myself..." He grabbed her hand and pulled it off the harpoon, then sighed as he set his breathing in order.

There were several lines of red blood on the back of her slender hand. Pulling on an unpolished wire like that with her bare hands, of course they would get cut.

"Argh, think before you act..."

"Eh?"

Kieli blinked in surprise; apparently she didn't understand what he was talking about. She followed his gaze down to her own hands and, after a pause, seemed to get his meaning and looked upset.

"Hey! What are you talking about?! *You're* the one who's pretty darn close to dying!"

"...Oh. Oh yeah. Me."

Now that she mentioned it...His reaction seemed rather absurd even to him; Kieli was speechless, as if she couldn't believe it. "Are you stupid?!" she shouted threateningly.

"...Sorry." Harvey winced and apologized automatically, then felt a wave of annoyance and looked away. *Why is she getting mad at me?*

Far in the distance, he could see the hulls of the *Sandwalker* and *The Sand Mole's Birthplace*; they were already quite a ways away. The sandworm dipped in and out of the ocean again and again, making high waves and playing with the two ships.

"Should I capsize them?" someone above his head asked suddenly. Harvey raised his face from the floorboard and looked around; he saw a little girl doll sitting on the edge of the boat, swinging her tiny feet back and forth.

".....?"

"Should I capsize them? I will if you want me to." The doll

repeated her question, a smile on her face, as Harvey frowned, wondering who the hell she was.

He glared dubiously at the doll, but after a bit, he looked away, turned his eyes back to the ocean, and muttered, "...Nah. Leave 'em..."

As the waves tossed the *Sandwalker* about, he could make out Ol Han on the deck, enduring the rocking by clinging to the rail.

Their eyes met, he thought—he probably didn't imagine it. Ol Han's eyesight wasn't bad, so it wouldn't be surprising for him to notice Harvey's gaze.

Neither of them wore any expression. The friendship they might have shared long ago had of course been flung to the edge of the world, but that didn't mean that they hated each other. It was just that their stations had shifted with the flow of time; he was sure that was all it was.

"Harvey...? Are you okay? Hey, are you breathing?" Kieli asked, bringing her face close; maybe his sudden silence had worried her.

"...Yeah," he answered succinctly, pulling her head closer; he combed his fingers through her soft black hair and closed his eyes for a few seconds.

Somewhere along the way, their stations had shifted; that was all.

That was all, but he had a hard time accepting it.

The harpoon had lodged itself into Harvey's body far more tightly than Kieli first thought, so she had to exert quite a bit of force to extract it. Harvey said he would do it himself, but it was even harder just to watch without doing anything; so the next thing she knew, she found herself helping. She held on to the hook protruding from the end and pulled with all her might. The gruesome task made her feel as though something crawled through the palm of her hand and down her spine.

The moment they dislodged the harpoon, with one last sliding sensation, Harvey fell forward onto the bottom of the boat, bent like a boomerang, gasping for air. Blood gushed between his fingers as he held the wound, forming a black puddle.

"Just a little more. Move your hand."

She felt as if she was about to cry, but Kieli bit her lip and braced herself; since Harvey was holding his wound and not about

to move, she took his hand and pulled it away. They may have removed the harpoon, but there were still dozens of meters of wire sewn through him.

Kieli started pulling very carefully at the cord. As she pulled it through Harvey's body toward her, the parts of the wire that didn't have blood on them came out stained dark red; but even so, she kept biting her lower lip and continued her work, her expression unchanging.

After a long while, she finally excised the wire completely; she couldn't stand looking at it anymore, and tossed it overboard.

"It's over..." Muttering in relief, she let out a deep breath of all the air she had been unconsciously holding in. Exhausted, she glanced sideways to see how he was doing; Harvey, his forehead pressed against the bottom of the boat, showed absolutely no sign of responding. Kieli grew a little uneasy and crouched beside him, brought her face close, and whispered, "Harvey? Does it hurt?"

"...No," came his thoughtless, hoarse reply; then he broke off again. She sensed that he didn't want her to talk to him anymore, so Kieli waited in silence.

In the middle of the quiet ocean, all she could see was the blue-gray surface of the sand; the small boat carrying her, Harvey, and the doll drifted all alone.

It was a bright night. The moons shone vaguely through the thin gas that covered the sky. One near the border of the horizon, one diagonally above—it was unusual to see both moons in one night, even if they did appear only faintly. It was said that the waves of flowing sediment crashed into each other, breaking the sand up into fine dust that danced up into the air and formed the granular layer of atmosphere that enveloped the entire planet. In that respect, the sky was a part of the ocean sands, too.

Lost in the sound of sliding currents that washed comfortably over her, Kieli closed her eyes without realizing.

"...After all this time, this scenery hasn't changed a bit..." She suddenly heard a short murmur, as though the speaker was half talking to himself. She opened her eyes and looked down next to her; Harvey had lifted his cheek slightly from the bottom of the boat and was looking up at the sky. The white shadow of a moon was reflected in his copper-colored eyes.

"I wonder why people change with time..."

Maybe it was because of the pale moonlight that his profile

gave an even more emotionless impression than usual; Kieli looked wordlessly down at it, and vaguely thought that Harvey was somehow like this planet. She was sure that this world had watched indifferently, never changing now or before, as people went on building their foolish history.

A heavy atmosphere wrapped around them, and time passed in silence for a while. Then Harvey said, "Argh, that was a mistake. Maybe we really *should* have capsized them." He rolled over on the floor; apparently he had recovered enough to make flippant comments. "I always suspected humans weren't to be trusted, but now I'm pretty certain."

He said it so simply, but she felt as if he had just made a declaration that was, in a way, rather shocking. Kieli opened her mouth a few times to speak before she finally blurted out, "Hey! Even if the whole world turns against you, I'll always be on your side, Harvey. So you can at least trust me...!" She thought maybe that was a little abrupt and looked at him to gauge his mood, and, as she expected, Harvey was speechless, and wore a look that said, "What is she going off about *now*?"

Then, after a pause, he started laughing. "Crap, that hurts..." Maybe his carelessness had affected his wound; he doubled over on the floor, but he was still holding back laughter. Kieli furrowed her brow in disappointment, wondering if what she said was that funny.

"Why are you laughing?"

"No reason..."

"Why?!" she pressed, crouching beside him; Harvey, lying on his face, muttered something under his breath. She couldn't hear it clearly, but the intonation she barely managed to make out was familiar—he would almost never say it to her face, but sometimes he would say "thank you" like this.

She heard a cheerful snicker behind her. She raised her head and turned around to see the doll, sitting carefreely on the edge of the boat, watching them with a smile on her face.

"Oh yeah, what *is* that?" Harvey asked dubiously, suppressing his laughter.

"Oh, her!" Kieli realized that she had failed to tell him about the doll and the abandoned ship, and started to recount the situation again when...

"You're Ephraim, right? I'm so glad; I've been wanting to meet you." The words leapt from the doll's lips. Kieli blinked blankly; in

contrast, maybe it was a conditioned response, but a hint of caution rose in Harvey's demeanor for an instant.

"...How do you know that?" A dangerous air hovered about his voice, and it was a key lower than normal. But the doll showed no sign of fear and went on in a frank tone.

"Jude would talk sometimes, about you, and about Joachim. I could tell right away; you have exactly the same air about you as Jude. I wonder if Joachim does, too?"

"Wait a second! You know Jude—does that mean...he was alive...?!"

The doll nodded her head up and down, and Harvey froze for a minute, a look of mute amazement on his face...or so Kieli thought. But then he suddenly jumped up, crying, "Where is he now?!" He crawled on his hands and tried to get closer to the doll, but on his way there, he started coughing and doubled over. The blood that had finally stopped started spilling out of his wound again.

"Harvey, you have to stay still."

A little surprised at how unusually upset he was, Kieli went to Harvey's side and rubbed his back as he choked on the blood rising in his throat. "Honestly. You're more trouble than I thought," the doll said in exasperation as she watched them from the edge of the boat. "You're really going to have to help this one, Kieli."

"Eh...?" Kieli looked up in shock at the familiar line. Who was it who said that? She felt as though she heard it so recently, and yet so long ago...

The doll, still wearing the same apron dress she'd worn when Kieli was small, and the same smile as back then, too, met Kieli's gaze—her blue glass eyes were filled with a calm light that left a deep impression.

But I know there's someone who needs you. You have to be his friend and help him...

In those eyes, she could see the deep-colored, all-encompassing eyes of the person who had combed Kieli's hair as she soothed her, lying beside her on their bed.

"M...om...?"

Now it was Kieli's turn to fall speechless in amazement.

"Are you my mom...? Why? How long...?" she muttered, stunned, dropping to the boat's floor.

She gazed into the doll's silently smiling eyes, and little by little, a pervading happiness filled her heart. *She's my mom...!*

For no reason, she found her gaze darting about, and her eyes met Harvey's, looking questioningly up at her. "Guess what! She's my mom! My mom came to see me!" Harvey just blinked, unable to grasp her meaning, and she quickly shifted her gaze from him back to the doll.

"I didn't remember what happened back then. That's why it took me so long to come; I'm sorry..."

"You don't have to apologize for that," the doll said in a bright voice mixed with a wry laugh. Kieli couldn't be happier. Her strange power to see the dead, to hear their voices—she might never have felt so blessed to have that power as she did now. It was a special privilege that only Kieli enjoyed; Julius couldn't imitate it.

Thunk...

There was a dull impact as the bottom of the boat caught on something.

".....?" She put her hand on the edge of the boat and leaned over to peer below; something like a squashed fuel tank from a three-wheeled taxi was poking out of the sand. What was it doing in the middle of the ocean like this...?

"Kieli, over there." She heard an awed, hoarse voice behind her. She looked up to see Harvey pull himself up, pressing one hand against his abdomen, and gaze far across the ocean. Kieli followed his eyes and turned around. "Wa, ah...", she muttered involuntarily with a sound like a sigh.

The rolling surface of the sand stretched to the edge of the horizon, burying all kinds of things within it.

Train wheels, three-wheeled taxis with their tires fallen off, bleached animal bones, window frames, stoves, rusty toy robots; those things standing over the sand like leaning towers were probably the bent supports of sand ships...The faint light of the moons illuminated countless long, bluish shadows as they fell over the sand, like grave markers standing like a forest in the wilderness. Or it might have been like a deserted sandbox, after the children had finished playing and gone home, abandoning their toys.

Between them, she could see parts of coffins buried in the sand, floating like white buoys. Some had weathered and started to melt into the sand; some weren't very old and kept their original shape.

"Is this...the final destination of the Sand Ocean...?"

"I've never seen it before, either..."

They each managed a single sentence; then both lost all words,

and gazed in wonder at the scene spreading before them.

The final destination of everything set adrift on the flowing sands, the Sand Ocean Graveyard.

It was a world without sound. The silence was so intense it reverberated in her mind like a high-pitched, grinding ringing in her ears.

Even the ever-present sound of sliding sand rising and falling again and again had suddenly stopped. The flow of the sand, the dry wind that blew over the ocean, even the clouds that moved above them—everything here had come to a complete halt, as if time had left them behind. No, it wasn't that; maybe time was drifting at such a slow, sluggish pace that humans couldn't perceive it. Because they said that once things drifted here, they stopped flowing and stayed, reborn into the ocean sands over eternity.

"...This is where things settle when their lives have ended. It's too early for you two to be here yet," said the doll, in a calm voice that melted comfortably into the silence. Kieli, who had forgotten where she was and gotten lost in the scenery, started and regarded the doll.

The doll returned her gaze with her blue glass eyes and smiled softly.

"Mom..."

"You've grown, Kieli."

"Yeah. No, not much..."

Kieli's response was awkward. She had so much she wanted to talk about, so much she wanted to ask, but now that she could, she couldn't put anything into words; she looked down, faltering. She turned to Harvey for help, but of course he just looked at her as if to say, "Why are you looking at me?" Watching their subtle exchange from the edge of the boat, the doll chuckled, amused.

"Please take care of her, Ephraim. Although in some ways, I'm more worried about *you*," she declared simply, striking Harvey speechless. At a loss for how to respond, this time *he* looked at Kieli as if to say, "Say something, you!" But Kieli was at a similar loss.

Just then, there was a clatter as forces were set in motion, pushing them from behind, and the boat suddenly started sliding across the sand—but there wasn't the slightest hint of waves or wind.

As if inertia held her back, the doll's upper body fell overboard.

"Ah...!"

Automatically, Kieli leapt to the edge of the boat, leaned over, and reached out to the doll as it fell into the ocean.

When she thought she had grabbed the doll's hand in the nick of time, the force kept pushing her forward, and she went over the edge. "You idiot!" Harvey's arms wrapped around her from behind—at the same time, a wind rose softly from somewhere and caught Kieli, like gentle outstretched hands.

Inside the wind she saw the face of a woman who looked a lot like her. She smiled with her deep, clear black eyes.

I love you, Kieli...

And she disappeared with the wind as it passed by.

For a time, Kieli stared dazedly at the empty space where her mother vanished, but then gasped, "Mom...?" and turned her attention to the doll in her hand.

The doll, which had been moving until a minute ago, had lost all its energy; it just dangled by one arm, swinging forlornly. The tips of the small feet that hung from under her apron dress touched the ocean, leaving faint tracks on the surface.

"Mom...?"

She held the doll up and shook it lightly; its head teetered sideways, and its chestnut curls fell over its smiling, childlike cheeks. "Mom, Mom?" As she called out, she shook the doll over and over; every time she did, its head and curls rocked back and forth. "Mom, hey, what's wrong?" Still, Kieli didn't stop.

"Kieli."



“Mom!”

“Kieli, stop.” A quiet voice restrained her.

Kieli’s face snapped up and turned on the voice unintentionally, accusing its owner. His copper-colored eyes looked straight into hers. “She’s gone. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I do not!” Kieli answered immediately, cutting him off. She turned away and shook her head. “I *don’t* understand! I finally got to see her, so why did she disappear? Why did she say the same thing and leave me behind again? I...I really wasn’t okay. She promised she’d come right back, so I waited, but...she lied...!” Sobs intermingled with the tail end of words that stuck in her throat and wouldn’t come out. She clutched the listless doll in her arms and just shook her head again and again. Above her, Harvey sighed, at a loss for what to do.

In the faint light of the twin moons, the blue shadows of the flotsam that stood like statues in the sand grew small and distant.

If only the wake that drew a fine tail, trailing after their boat, would go on forever, showing the way that led to the ocean where her mother slept—she wished, but as the white wake got farther away from the boat, the end gradually melted into the sand and vanished.



“Young Master...Let’s give it up already; it’s been three whole days!”

Muttering quietly, “There’s no way she’s still alive,” the crewman took the binoculars away from his round spectacles and glanced beside him. A boy with light brown hair was standing on the main deck at the ship’s prow. He held a large pair of binoculars that seemed disproportional to his still small, childish hands, and had been motionlessly examining the sand-colored ocean.

“Master! Master Julius!” the crewman called persistently.

The boy, still peering through his binoculars, answered obstinately, “We look until we find her, duh.”

“You don’t have to be so stubborn...”

“Don’t you say that. If you don’t take this seriously, it’s the death penalty for you.”

The sailor paused—the boy was so casual with such an awful threat; he panicked, straightened up, gave a half-baked answer somewhere between “Yes, sir” and “Yeah, yeah,” and picked up his binoculars again. If he didn’t make himself sufficiently useful, there would be no way for him to escape prison.

It had been three nights since the redheaded youth and the girl with him had fallen overboard.

A lot of people had witnessed the strange sight—a small girl going up to the main deck, swinging a metal pipe from one hand—so the commotion reached the other crewmen and passengers in no time, and one after another, their evil deeds had come to light. A telegram was sent immediately to the Church branch in South-hairo, and *The Sand Mole’s Seventh Son* was to be put into Church Soldier custody and subject to investigation as soon as it reached port. They had already seized the slave merchant at port who owned the ship.

It all happened because of the mobility and influence of Julius, this boy who was barely over ten. None of the sailors knew any of the specifics of who he was beyond his being the son of some bigwig in the Church, but apparently the boy’s father had a lot of pull, even in the Church’s upper echelons. The crewman faced death; at the very least the world would never have anything to do with him—although he supposed that if the Church Soldiers caught him, they would have *plenty* to do with him.

Executing another of the boy’s orders, of course, *The Sand Mole’s Seventh Son* had changed its scheduled course and gone looking for the missing pair (although it seemed that it was only the girl who was important to him). The captain, the main offender, was confined in his quarters, but the boy had pulled the sailor out as a witness and made him help search.

All that entered his narrow field of vision, focused into two circles, was a wall of sandy blur; if he shifted his range, he saw the same blurry horizon far in the distance, where sky and sea mingled. He had been at this for hours already, accompanying the boy since before dawn this morning, but aside from the occasional flock of migrating birds passing from the corner of his eye as they circled above, there wasn’t even a single piece of flotsam in the endless monochrome world he was so sick of searching.

After a few minutes watching that scenery, his eyes started to hurt, and the sailor dropped his hands again; he pulled his coat collar closed and shivered. The sun may have been high, but after several hours standing under the winter sky, he was frozen to the core.

“...No one’s ever been found after getting lost at sea. Even if they do live a few days, they get carried off to the flowing sands’ final destination, and they ultimately die there. Unless there’s a miracle,” he grumbled, stamping his feet to get warm; when the boy’s cold stare hit him, he winced and shut his mouth. The boy had taken his eyes off his binoculars only for a second, and immediately went back to scanning the ocean’s surface. His cheeks, too, were flushed red with the cold, but his resolute attitude would not falter.

“Master...”

The sailor started to feel a little pathetic, and, deciding to summon his willpower and stick with the boy until he gave up, the crewman hoisted his binoculars a third time—although he didn’t think there was much point. Barring a miracle.

“It’s a miracle...,” he caught himself muttering.

The sailor looked up from his binoculars, blinking, then peered through them again. He hadn’t been seeing things.

Floating in the middle of his round window into the beige horizon, on the other side of the thin veil of gas, he could see a small boat.



“It’s a miracle. It’s incredible. It’s a miracle!”

“No, it’s not. It’s because you looked for us, Juli.”

“To be honest, I was starting to give up, too. But just then, there was a miracle. I’m sure that God is keeping special watch over you, Kieli!”

“It’s not like that...” At a bit of a loss, Kieli answered halfheartedly as Julius chattered.

For as long as she could remember, she couldn’t think of one time the Church’s God had protected her, and even if someone had protected her this time, she thought it was most likely some

mysterious force at play in the Sand Ocean, and her mother. He probably wasn't really conscious of it, but Julius sounded somehow proud as he insisted that there was no doubt that the Church's God had protected her; she felt as if something wasn't quite right. *That's stupid...*

She felt a pang of self-disgust when she realized her thoughts had taken a cruel turn toward him, and she looked away, feeling awkward.

South-hairo port. The western entrance to the South-hairo parish that covered the southeastern continent.

Under the afternoon sky, hung with thin, sand-colored clouds, *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son* had come alongside the wharf that reached its long arms toward the ocean. Moving busily around the ship with the overalled crewmen were soldiers wearing white, metal-plated armor over their priest's robes—they weren't as heavily armored as the Undying Hunters, but they were a squad of Church Soldiers.

Kieli had caught sight of them leading the captain and the bespectacled crewman away a little while ago. The sailor turned his timid round glasses her way just once, and, unexpectedly, he seemed relieved, like he was finally free.

"Master Julius. I have a message from your father," a polite voice called out to them from a little ways off as Kieli mused at the carved seal of *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son* engraved on its hull, lost in thought.

Big trucks had stopped in a line, forming a black wall at the entrance to the pier. One Church Soldier stood in front of them, waving his hand.

"Yeah. I'll be right there," Julius answered, waving back, saying, "Kieli, wait here. My mom's house is nearby. I'm gonna be staying there a while, so come with me. It's not like you have any pressing business to take care of, right?"

He started off, then turned and repeated, "You wait there!" pointing at her for emphasis, before scampering toward the truck.

Kieli gave no response and only watched the boy leave, dressed from head to toe in his best clothes, then turned back to face the ocean.

She found a broken piece of concrete from the pier lying at her feet, stuck out her toe, and kicked it; it skipped three times on the sand before disappearing into the current.

"Staying angry like that won't do you any good. What are you sulking for?" she suddenly heard a voice say beside her. She turned and saw Harvey standing in the shadow of the cargo unloaded on a corner of the pier; how long had he been there?

He leaned on the pile, lit a cigarette, and drew the smoke into his lungs, coughing lightly (he hadn't fully healed, so he really should cut that out), then shoved his lighter into the pocket of his overalls. The ship medic's suspicious look terrified Kieli as he said, "For all the blood, it's not that bad; you were so beat up, I thought your guts had been ransacked," but fortunately, he didn't press the matter and lent them each a pair of the crew's work overalls.

Their bags and Kieli's shoes had been left in the cabin, but as they didn't have anything worth stealing, it was all still there.

"Juli doesn't understand. His mom is always nearby, protecting him," Kieli answered, pouting, and looked back at the ocean, squeezing the doll in her arms close. Her mother was no longer inside. She wouldn't stay with Kieli like Julius's mother.

"That's what they call misplaced anger. Really, your mom and Julius's mom have both left this stage of your lives."

"Don't talk like you're so great. You don't get it, either, Harvey."

"...No, I don't. Excuse me," he spat back at her, and Kieli immediately regretted her words, but now that it was out, she couldn't take it back; she pursed her lips and fell silent.

"Things are gonna get bad soon, so I'm leaving," Harvey said, changing the subject. Outwardly maintaining his lack of expression, he cast a sideways glance at the group of trucks and the Church Soldiers standing by them. "What are you gonna do? If you're really gonna go to Julius's, then go by yourself. Or do you intend to just stand there for the rest of your life?"

Maybe she really had offended him; he talked as if he was ready to abandon her, and Kieli was afraid to face him. She shook her head, still gazing at the ocean before her. But whatever she did, she still couldn't bring herself to leave.

As she looked to the horizon where the tawny sky and sea met, her thoughts were on the final destination that must have been far beyond it.

"What're you gonna do?" Harvey repeated, somewhat irritated. Kieli didn't answer. Still looking—glaring—at the horizon, she was actually surveying the scenery of the final resting place in her

mind's eye.

Her mother was sleeping in that ocean.

After he waited a bit, she sensed Harvey sighing and moving away from the stacked cargo. He seemed to stop and turn back to her once, but Kieli didn't budge, and soon the sound of workboots walking on the paved road grew distant. Even so, half out of stubbornness, Kieli refused to turn around.

The dry, sandy wind blew past, stroking her hair and cheeks, almost in exasperation.

"You're not mad...?" she murmured, looking down at the doll she held in her arms, once the footsteps receded and vanished completely. She wondered if her mother wouldn't scold her, even though she was being so stubborn and mean.

As expected, the doll didn't speak to her again. An innocent smile in her blue glass eyes, she looked up at Kieli mutely.

You know what you should do.

For some reason, she felt as if that's what the doll was telling her.

Kieli raised her face and turned back. Harvey had already disappeared from the port street that opened onto the ocean. She looked around, then started off in the direction that came to her intuitively.

"Kieli, wait!" The boy's voice chased after her. She stopped and turned her head. Julius had spotted her and jumped down off a truck; he was running toward her. She noticed that there were even more Church Soldiers around the trucks than before and had a bad feeling.

"We just got news from the capital. I never thought he was an Und—"

Kieli didn't wait for Julius to finish; she set off running again. "Wait! Did you *know*, Kieli?" he called, trying to stop her. She felt his surprise, hesitation, and a bit of hurt at her betrayal.

I'm sorry, Juli, she apologized in her heart. She had actually made a friend, but she would probably never see him again. Even so, she ran as fast as she could, without looking back. A wind blew past her from the ocean, as if telling her which way to go.

She felt as if her mother were giving her a push forward.

“SAY SO LONG TO MY DOLL.”

The low music of the shifting sands, gently flowing and ebbing, and the neat tinkering sounds he could hear from his hands filled his ears pleasantly. Harvey didn't hate times like this, when he could immerse himself in doing something alone.

He put the casing over the circuit board that he had reconstructed and screwed it into place. The rusty screws gave small, high-pitched screeches as they sunk in—speaking of miracles, he wasn't convinced that the biggest miracle of all wasn't the fact that not a single part of the radio had gone missing in all that insane mess.

As his thoughts drifted pointlessly like this, he enjoyed the quiet for a moment longer before fixing the last screw in place.

He turned the radio upright and switched on the power. There was an instant of static, but after that, nothing.

What? It didn't work...?

Doubting his own skill a little, he tried turning up the volume. Just then...

"Are you stupid?!"

"Wah!"

The shout suddenly sprang from the speaker at full volume, sending him sprawling backward, and he came dangerously close to falling off the sand barrier he had been sitting on. Flailing his airborne feet, he panicked and scrambled to find the concrete with his toes, just managing to avoid toppling over.

He sighed in relief and glared down at the radio on his lap.

"That was close! What the hell?"

"You just couldn't get your act together and make up your mind, and that's why these crazy guys come from behind and—" The voice from the speaker accosted him, sounding pretty crazy itself, but halfway through, the Corporal must have finally realized that the situation had changed, and he cut himself off.

"...Where's the stairs? Where's the guy who attacked us?" he spouted, dazed, after a few seconds of terribly disappointed silence. Harvey felt the weight of the exhaustion he'd accumulated recently finally come to a head, and let out a deep sigh.

"That was over long ago..."

"What? What the hell is going on? Are we already at port? What

happened on the ship? Explain yourself, damn it, Herbie!"

"Give me a break. I'll tell you later," he grumbled wearily; he didn't even have the energy to correct the radio about his name. So on top of Kieli, now he had to explain everything from the beginning to the Corporal, too? If his prosthetic arm had had a mouth, Harvey would have let it recount everything for him.

"What about Kieli? She feeling better?"

"Oh, yeah." That was over long ago, too.

"I don't see her. Where is she?"

"She'll be here soon enough..." he muttered, then added, under his breath so that the radio couldn't hear, "I think..."

He gazed to his left, along the barrier that bordered the coastline; in the distance, he could see the white cape of South-hairo port projecting into the ocean. He could just make out a few large tankers anchored there, but he couldn't tell which was *The Sand Mole's Seventh Son*. Aside from the single railroad that led from the port to the towns inland, and the paved roads used by the Church's trucks, there was nothing to be seen but a dry stretch of land interrupted by a few forlorn shrubs here and there.

Harvey had walked along the ocean for a while, away from the towns, and sat absentmindedly on the breakers. The ebbing sand caressed the sides of his shoes as he slung them over the ocean.

The sun had sunken low while Harvey immersed himself in the radio's repairs. In this fleeting instant, the drab scenery, nothing but a wall of monochromatic haze, became a tapestry, a mysterious, indescribable gradation of various shades. The line of atmosphere along the horizon where ocean and sky blended together was dyed a rusty orange, and from there it gradually turned to a grayish blue as it ascended.

Considering how much longer he'd linger there, Harvey placed his umpteenth cigarette between his lips and lit it. He'd really done a number on his lungs, so whenever he inhaled smoke, he ended up coughing violently, but, for some reason, he forced himself to smoke anyway; maybe as an admonition to himself not to trust people so much.

I guess there was one girl who said she wanted me to at least trust her.

Patter patter patter...

Light footsteps approached, treading the concrete.

He looked up and turned to the harbor; he could see a small

silhouette approaching through the thin haze that was dyed the color of sunset. She held a doll under her arm, and her shoulder bag bounced against her lower back as she ran across the barrier.

Still sitting, he waited, angling just his face toward her; she stopped a little before she reached him. Maybe she had been running the whole time; the blood had rushed to her cheeks, and she was winded.

“I-I thought you’d really left...,” was all she said, in a hoarse voice, before trying to catch her breath in earnest; he regarded her with an expression even he thought must have looked dumb. Perhaps his lack of response made her uneasy; a cloud suddenly fell over Kieli’s face, and she added, “Um, I can still go with you, right...? I was thinking that even if you say no, I’ll just follow you anyway...”

She studied the Undying for an answer; he held her gaze and considered his response, but in the end, “...Do what you want,” was all he said, and he looked casually away.

I thought she really might not come..., he brooded, then let out a wry laugh of self-derision. What made him ever doubt?

“If you’re coming, let’s go.” He picked up his backpack and the radio and started to get up.

“Ah, please, wait a second.” Still breathing heavily, Kieli sounded as if she’d forgotten something, and crouched down. Half standing, Harvey watched her blankly.

Kieli primped the doll in her hands and, taking a last look, reached down and gently released it into the ocean.

The doll fell with a light *splish* atop the sand and began drifting away from the coastline.

“Are you sure? It’s all you have to remember her by.”

“I’m sure,” Kieli murmured, her voice soft but resolute, as she held her knees and watched the doll recede. “I have you now, Harvey,” she added lightly; Harvey blinked involuntarily and considered the girl beside him. Her black eyes took on a quiet, profound aspect as she focused on the sea before her.

...*Well, whatever*, thought the Undying, turning to watch the ocean with her.

A blue-gray curtain gradually fell over the copper-colored horizon far in the distance.

As if reluctant to part, the doll kept her glass eyes fixed in their direction as she vanished against the distant field of darkening

sand.



AFTERWORD

I've been thinking of how to start this afterword for three weeks, but the next thing I know, it's the day before deadline. I'm in trouble if I don't shape up and write it today.

...After racking my brains for three weeks, this is the introduction I come up with.

Hello, I'm Yukako Kabei.

I'm writing this as I eat breakfast in my neighborhood coffee shop. Even though it's evening. I get the feeling that, as I sit here for hours every single time, staring at my laptop, staring at my printouts, sometimes eating my pencil, the employees are suspicious of me, wondering what that customer does for a living, and it makes me uneasy. I'm not anyone worthy of suspicion, so...

This book, *Kieli: White Wake on the Sand*, is the continuation of my previous, and virgin, work, *Kieli: The Dead Sleep in the Wilderness*.

My last book centered around the journey of a train, spouting smoke as it chugged across the wilderness, and now this book focuses on the journey of a steamship, spouting smoke as it sails across an ocean of sand. Storywise, it's about a girl with a complicated personality and a man who hates doing anything, getting together and being separated, as well as the story of a man who's tired of living regaining purpose in his life...but he can't quite fully grasp that purpose, and sometimes ends up dragging emotional baggage. Was it okay for me to write that? Well, I already did...

Um, yes. Tentatively, for now, at the present, there are plans for a sequel.

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If you like, I would love it if you would stick around for their story a while longer.

Now then, a lot of people helped me make this book a reality. I'm going to do this every time, and use this space to express my gratitude.

To everyone who helped in the production of this book, and to my editor. I know this is my second book, but I haven't gotten used to a thing, and I actually caused a lot *more* trouble than last time, but you never threw out the annoying newbie, and you patiently

stuck with me. I am truly thankful for that.

To Taue-san, who again made my clumsy story exciting with his beautiful illustrations. You're a wonderful, soothing person, just as would be expected of someone who draws such delicate, gentle pictures. On the way home from the party celebrating the completion of the last book, we kept bowing to each other, saying, "Really, thank you so much, thank you for all you did, I look forward to working with you in the future," and someone from the editorial department asked, "What are you, shishi-odoshi*?"

To my family, friends, and acquaintances. I'm managing to survive somehow, so please don't worry. It looks as if it will be a little longer before I can keep a mameshiba.**

* "Shishi-odoshi" is the device seen in a lot of Japanese gardens to scare away deer. It's made of bamboo, and placed in a little stream, so that as it fills with water, it tips downward, striking a hard surface beneath it (to make a noise and scare deer away), thus emptying it so it stands upright again. Thus, it is constantly bowing.

** "Mameshiba" is the miniature breed of the shiba ken dog breed.

And finally, of course, this will turn into the same conclusion as last time, but really, with all my heart...

I offer my sincerest thanks to you who are holding this book in your hands. I hope we get a chance to meet again.

Yukako Kabei



STORY BY **Yukako Kabei**

ART BY **Shiori Teshirogi**



KIELI

Kieli © YUKAKO KABEI/ASCII MEDIA WORKS, INC. © SHIORI TESHIROGI/AKITASHOTEN

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES IN THE MANGA
ADAPTATION OF THE HIT NOVEL SERIES

APRIL 2010
**SPICE
&
WOLF**



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